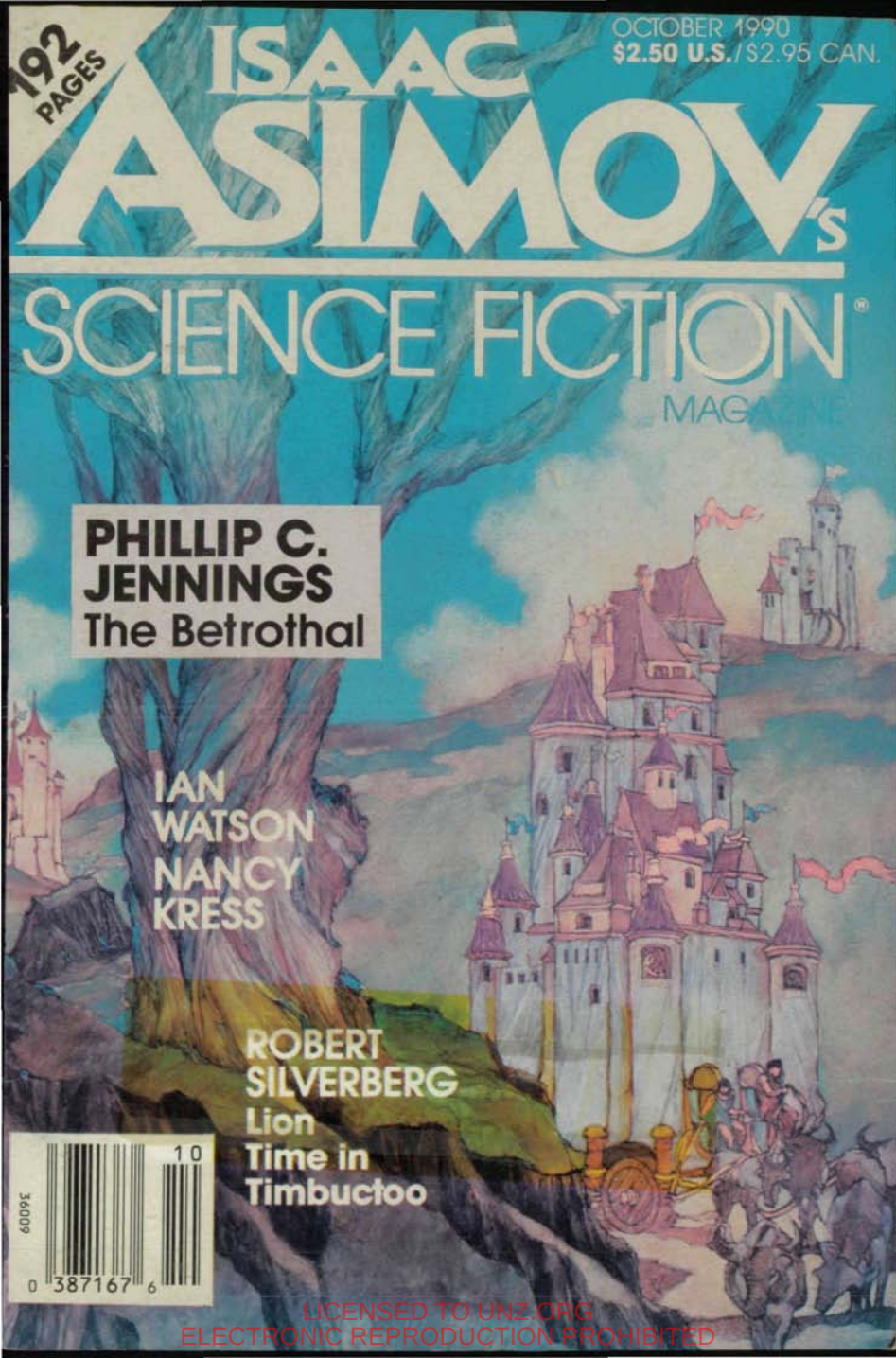

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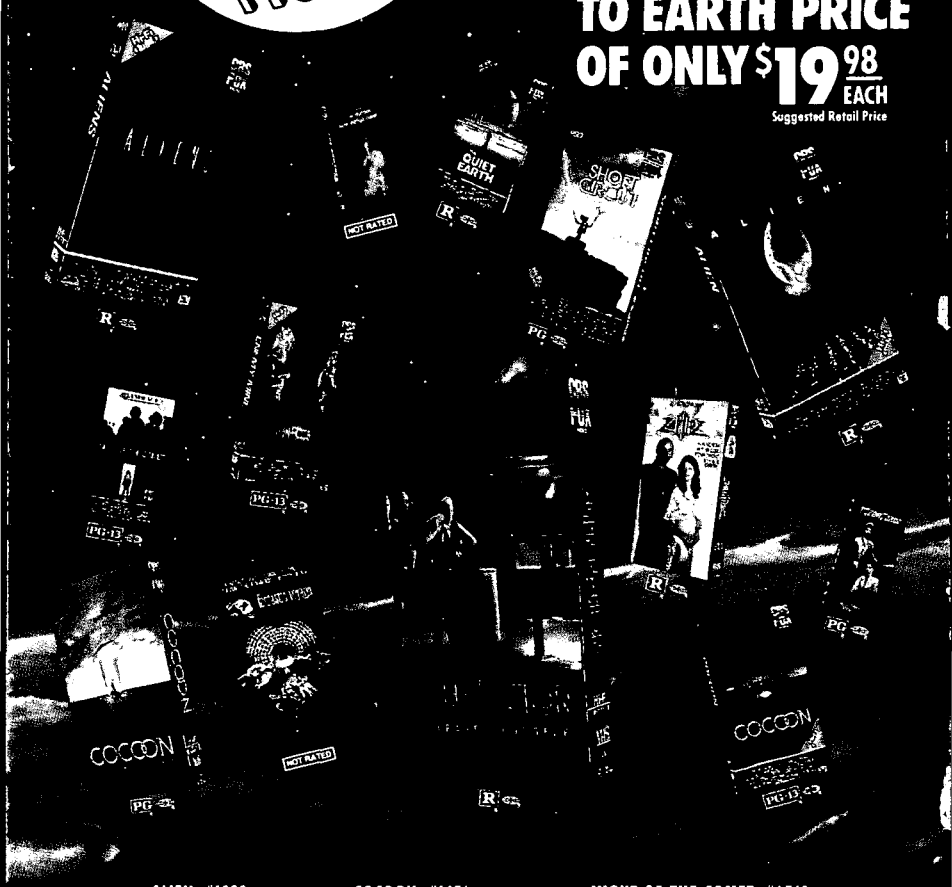

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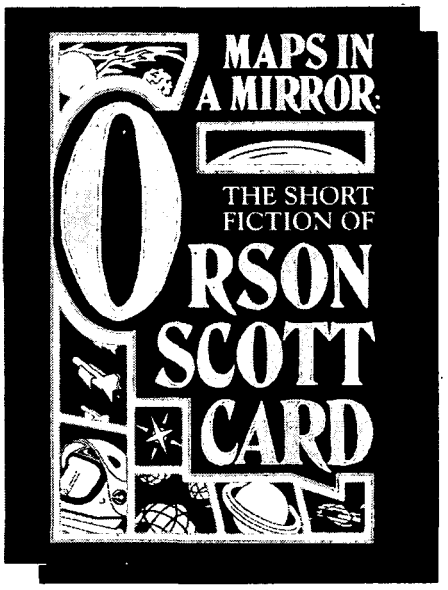

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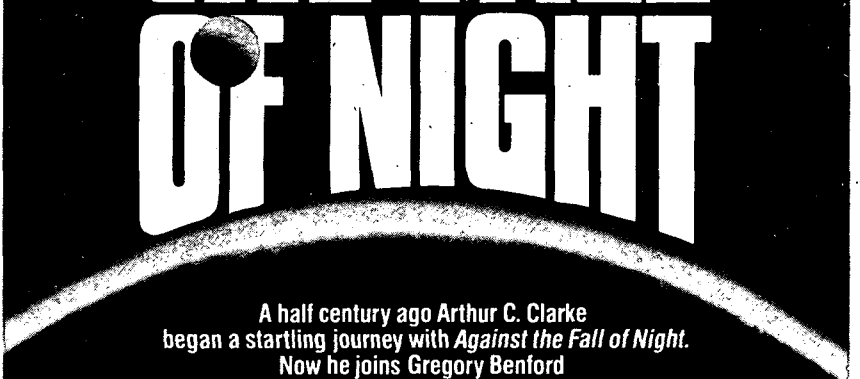

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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October 1990
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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

ARE SCIENTISTS STUPID?

I get letters, quite frequently, from people who have bent their brains to the task of puzzling out the riddles of the universe, and who have come to the conclusion that scientists have it all wrong. Either scientists are so stupid that they can't see the truth which is so plain to the letter-writer; or else they are, for some reason, in a conspiracy to fool the public.

One of the more smile-provoking letters I got recently went something like this. "Why do astronomers say there are a couple of hundred billion stars in the galaxy? Most of them are hidden by dark dust clouds and can't be counted. How can you explain this?"

I have to smile at this when I think how the letter-writer thinks astronomers work.

I imagine he sees two of them, Joe and Al, and Joe says, "Let's count the stars." "Why not?" says Al. "You count them over there and I'll count them over here."

Then after a while, Joe says, "How many have you got, Al." Al says, "I've got a little over three million. And you?" "Almost four million." "Hey, there's a bunch here we haven't counted. Get to work."

And then eventually, Joe says, "You know there are lots of stars hidden by dust clouds. What do we do?"

And Al says, "What the hell. Let's just say there are two hundred billion stars. Who's to know the difference?"

Of course, that is not the way astronomers work.

Over a long period of time, astronomers made careful measurements of the movements of stars in our vicinity, the rate at which they move across the sky, the rate at which they are approaching us or receding from us. By dint of very careful reasoning, it becomes possible to see how all these motions reflect the motion of our sun as it moves in its orbit about the center of the galaxy.

We know the center of the galaxy is 30,000 light-years away from us (more extremely careful measurements) and we decide that it takes Earth some 200 million years to make one circuit about the galactic center. From this we can estimate roughly that the galaxy is

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100,000,000,000 times as massive as our sun.

If our sun were a typical star, then that would mean there are about 100,000,000,000 stars in the galaxy, but our sun is not typical. By studying all the stars in our vicinity, it becomes quite plain that most stars are smaller than the sun. In fact, the average star may be half the mass of the sun.

That would mean the galaxy would contain 200,000,000,000 stars.

Of course, that's only a ballpark figure, and as is true of every part of the scientific endeavor, working out solutions uncovers new and more subtle problems. By studying the manner in which stars circle galactic centers, it turns out that galaxies, generally, must be considerably more massive than one would think from the stars alone.

What constitutes the nature of this mysterious mass is as yet unknown and astronomers are having a great deal of fun speculating and making suggestions.

But imagine how little my letter-writer knew of astronomy, and yet how ready he was to challenge astronomers.

Another challenge I got was this: "How can astronomers possibly know the temperature at the center of the sun. Do they have a thermometer long enough to reach that center?"

Blessings on my letter-writer's head. All he knew about temperature measurement was thermometers. I suppose he imagines Joe and

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Al working over the sun's internal temperature. "We need a thermometer," said Joe, "that's about a million miles long?" "Right," says Al, "and we have to fire it right into the sun and take a reading."

They think about it for a while and then Joe says, "I don't think that's practical." Al says, "I don't think so, either. I tell you what. Let's say the internal temperature of the Sun is 15,000,000 degrees absolute. Who's to know any different?"

Well, that's not the way astronomers work either and how is it conceivable that anyone, however naïve, would think they do?

Through the later nineteenth century, physicists carefully studied the radiation given off by materials at different temperatures and worked out laws of such radiation.

This means that by analyzing the radiation of a glowing substance by means of a spectroscope, one could measure its temperature without ever putting a thermometer to it.

As the twentieth century advanced, the structure of atoms came to be understood and the role of temperature in ripping off electrons from atoms was studied. This meant that still higher temperatures could be measured spectroscopically. The solar spectrum tells you how hot the solar surface is —about 5700 degrees. There are cooler stars, some with surfaces at barely 2000 degrees, and hotter ones with surfaces at as much as 25,000 degrees.

Of course, that leaves us with the problem of how we tell the temperature at the center of a star, such as our sun.

In 1922, it became quite certain that it was possible for stars to collapse. The companion of Sirius was a white dwarf. It had the mass of our sun, but it had collapsed to the size of a rather small planet.

The question was, then, why hadn't our sun collapsed to the size of a rather small planet, putting an end to life on Earth? What kept the star an expanded object, giving off ample light and heat?

The problem was considered by a British astronomer, Arthur Stanley Eddington.

He reasoned this way. On the side of collapse was the pull of gravity. The sun's enormous gravitational field pulled it together from all directions and if there weren't some force to counter it, the sun would collapse.

Obviously there was some force to counter it. If the sun were a huge volume of gas (which, as it happened, it turned out to be) then it was subject to the gas laws, which scientists had worked out over a period of four centuries.

Gases had three properties, pressure, volume, and temperature, which maintained a balance. The volume of the sun was known. The pressure to which it was subjected by the pull of gravity was known. Given those two properties it was easy to calculate the third. It turned

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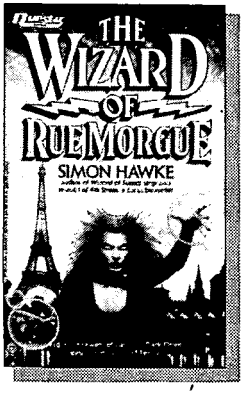

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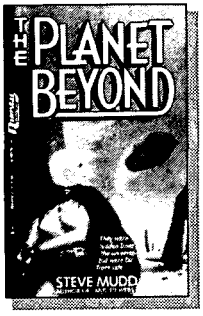

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

The *Rue Morgue*, a setting for the latest work by Simon Hawke (and of course Edgar Allan Poe last century) is filled with mystery, history, and legend... and, most importantly, it's a real place that you can visit even in our technologically deficient and magically lacking time.

Reality is very important to me (contrary to popular belief, I don't consider my official residence to be Twilo). We have to be able to believe an author's world enough so that we consider it worthwhile to suspend the disbelief that exists around the fringes (a.k.a. demons, aliens, or super-intelligent species *that are not human*).

One day I hope to go to the *Rue Morgue*... but until then reading about it is enough. *Arigato!*

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out that in order to keep the sun expanded, the temperature at the center of the sun would have to be something like 15,000,000 degrees.

The 15,000,000 degrees at the center of the sun is maintained by fusion reactions in which hydrogen is converted to helium on a large scale. Some day enough of the hydrogen fuel will be consumed to introduce a series of changes whereby our sun will expand to a red giant and then collapse to a white dwarf. That, however, is some billions of years in the future.

Since Eddington's time, of course, we have learned a great deal about the kind of nuclear reactions that go on at the huge temperatures at the center of a star, and that has introduced problems, too. Thus, the sun ought to be producing neutrinos in vast numbers and some of these should be picked up in special detectors on Earth. The only trouble is that in years of study, scientists have never detected more than a third of the neutrinos that they ought to have detected.

This may mean that eventually, they'll have to rethink conditions at stellar centers.

Of course, the real prize of arguments against scientific views consists of resistance to the thought that the speed of light in a vacuum is a true limit. I have lost count of the number of letters I get from earnest people, who say, "If a ship heads off in one direction at 180,000 miles a second, and another ship heads off in the exactly opposite direction at 180,000 miles a second, then doesn't each ship measure the other's speed at 360,000 miles a second which is far greater than the speed of light?"

Imagine the brilliance of the thought. Einstein obviously never thought of it; neither did any of the great relativists who followed him. They all worked out the theory of relativity without ever pausing to consider these two spaceships heading in opposite directions.

I never quite have the nerve to answer such letters. The fact is that speeds are not added in the same way that apples are added. Speeds are added relativistically, according to an equation worked out by Einstein so that two speeds, however close each may be to the speed of light, will, on addition, *not* reach the speed of light.

I can imagine myself telling my brilliant letter-writers this. I can imagine their indignation. I am sure they would much prefer to believe that Einstein was too stupid to see their point, or that he said, "Hey, let's make the speed of light in a vacuum a limit. Who's to know the difference?" ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

My husband subscribes to your science fiction magazine and reads it hungrily. I seldom read SF (for whatever reason) but am completely hooked on your editorials.

This letter is in response to "Metaphor" in the Mid-December issue. You stated, "If you ask an artist to illustrate a piece of writing *precisely*, you make of him a slave *to the* literal word. You suppress his creativity and impugn the independence of his mind and ability. The better the artist, the less likely he is to accept such a job."

I'm afraid I disagree with you there. When I read your statement I immediately thought of John Tenniel, the original illustrator of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. It is some thirty years since I discovered *Alice*, and often yet I take my *Wonderland/Looking Glass* volume from the shelf and read a little, look at the pictures a little. And except for the fact that Alice was portrayed as a blonde (she was a brunette, which was not mentioned in the stories), Mr. Tenniel made very literal illustrations indeed.

There have been other illustrators for these books since their first printings, of course, but those volumes don't last. People want Tenniel. They like to see the Cotswold sheep with so many knitting needles in her "hands," the Queen of Hearts' resemblance to Queen Victoria, the kindly face of the White Knight. And if not for John Tenniel; would anyone today know what a Gryphon was?

I think you have confused illustration with "gallery art." "Gallery art" is meant to stand alone. Illustrations complement the written work and whether those illustrations are literal or metaphorical must be left to the discretion of author and artist. In the happiest circumstances (such as with Carroll/Tenniel, or A. A. Milne and Ernest H. Shepard, or Beatrix Potter and Beatrix Potter) the pictures become icons for the story. It is a rock-solid marriage.

Incidentally, in that same editorial you said ". . . my knowledge of art is so small as to be beneath contempt, so naturally, I can't be learned about it." I didn't believe that when I read it and I still don't. Sincerely,

Marianne Reneau
Martinez, GA

You mustn't ever think I would display false modesty (or any other kind). If I say I know nothing about art, I'm not just being coy. Anyway, I'm glad to publish a pleasant "view from the other side."

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

Oh, come on now, Isaac! It isn't often that I feel compelled to write to an editor, but I just read your editorial "Metaphor" in the Mid-December *IAsfm* and I must say I, who am one of your greatest fans, am disappointed. It seems to me that you are confusing poetic license (or, in this case, artistic license) with truth in advertising. There is a difference, you know.

Since I am part owner of a bookstore, I can say with some degree of authority that people do frequently buy a book by its cover. We both know that, and so do publishers, who spend inordinate sums of money on cover illustrations and dust jackets. (Sometimes they will even publish the same book with different covers to appeal to different book buyers, but don't tell that to anyone!)

Anyway, the only thing your correspondent was asking for was that the cover illustration be faithful to the story inside. Truth in advertising, is that too much to ask? If an artist is commissioned to do a painting on a particular subject, and it is destined to stand on its own, then metaphor is fine. But, if the cover is meant to help sell the book (and I dare you to tell me that it isn't) then a "literalist interpretation" should be required. If you saw an ad for a new car, and it pictured a winged chariot surrounded by a halo of light, most buyers (not to mention the Federal Trade Commission) would not take kindly to the "metaphor" theory. They would expect to see in the ad a faithful representation of what they are purchasing.

Well, I suppose I am stretching the point, but so did you, a little, with references to the Bible, Shakespeare, and Coleridge. I hope you will admit, though, that your "literalist" correspondent did have some valid cause for complaint. I hope that you, and other authors, can use what persuasive powers you might have to keep the cover illustrations on your books from becoming only "advertising gimmicks."

Sincerely yours,

Robert S. Ennis, M.D.
N. Miami Beach, FL

As a matter of fact, I am unable to avoid all the advertisements on television, and it is my distinct impression that they are *metaphoric in many ways. A winged chariot surrounded by a halo of light isn't a bad idea. Now that you've mentioned it, some ad agency will probably steal it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

It is always a pleasure to read your editorials, for it is all too rare to read something clearly and carefully reasoned and clearly and succinctly expressed. In your Mid-December issue there was also, in addition to the editorial I am writing about, a very good story by you, which greatly improved over what you have been writing lately. (For a while there I felt, sadly, that the poor Doctor was losing his marbles. Your rare stories were becoming so weak, but in "Too Bad!" you made a superb recovery.)

I wrote a lengthy and laboriously reasoned response to your editorial, "Metaphor," and was pleased

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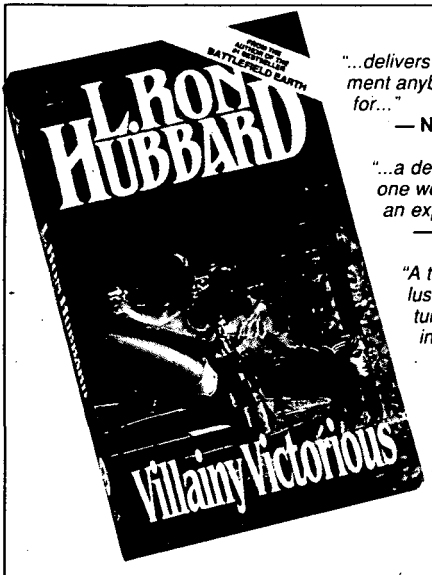

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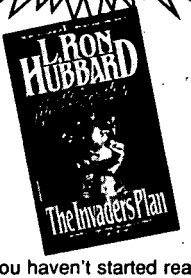

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to see that, as usual, when carefully checked against the editorial, my critique was rendered invalid because, as usual, you had been ahead of me in your reasoning. One point still stands, however, and you skillfully evaded it. That is, what is a good artist? You state that the better an artist is, the less likely he is to accept being a slave to the written word, but at the outset of the editorial you said your knowledge of art was "beneath contempt," a statement which I, incidentally, do not agree with, but that's by the by.

My point is that, to a certain extent, the illustrator MUST be a slave to the written word, for the written word is another, equally significant, form of art and the artist must not hold it in complete disdain. Your examples illustrate beautifully the degree of freedom the artist possesses, and your disagreement with the fellow who wanted graphic and literal illustration was well founded. What I wish to say, though, is that a good or great artist can perfectly well obtain his inspiration from a scene or imagined extrapolation of scenes that are the creation of another, and use it as the vehicle for his own creative impulse.

To parallel your illustrative examples: Shakespeare could take an historical tale and use it for the foundation of his own works. He could take a simple, logical response (of Macbeth to the blood on his hands, and his guilt) and use it as a vehicle to speak to the heart and transcend the mere subject matter. In the same way, an artist can take an image from a work of literature and so make it his own, by using it as a vehicle for his own transcendent vision.

Naturally, of course, this will not always make a suitable or saleable book illustration. There are great artists, and in an entirely different plane there are great illustrators.

I am boring you with all this because it impinges upon a topic that has been getting, in my opinion, ill-informed debate in SF magazines, namely, why does SF not qualify as "great literature"? The answer seems so obvious to me that I have not entered the debate, expecting in vain that someone would, of course, answer it. (Incidentally, some SF *does* qualify.) It is not a matter of mere tricks of words or characterizations, etc. It is that phrase I used above: it does not "speak to the heart," i.e., it does not transcend its subject matter to reveal a profound truth. It does, often, speak to the intellect, and delight the mind, but so do some of the electronics designs I work with, and the mathematics, and so on.

Likewise, an illustration, however beautiful and evocative, very seldom indeed qualifies as great art. It may, and often does, transcend its subject matter, or in some cases brings it forth, but it seldom has anything to reveal.

Yours,

Pierre Mihok
Don Mills, Ontario
Canada

You must not be hard on science fiction. If it very rarely qualifies as great literature—any *writing very rarely qualifies as great literature. The trouble is that when you have a transcendent literary genius such*

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as Shakespeare or Dostoyevski they (for some reason) don't choose to write science fiction. If they did, I assure you science fiction would be great literature.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

The more I read your magazine, the more convinced I become that readers of science fiction must be the most intelligent people in the world. No matter from what country they hail, only science fiction readers seem to be able to consistently express their views, both in agreement and disagreement, without resorting to vulgar language and epithets, even though that may be exactly what they are thinking. I consider myself proud to be counted among this group of enlightened people.

Enough rambling; on to the main content of this missive. Concerning your editorial in the Mid-December 1989 issue, "Metaphor"; I agree with you on the artistic license taken by the cover illustrator. That person's primary job is to catch the potential buyer's eye as well as show the buyer a brief graphic synopsis of the contents of the book. This is definitely not an easy job, and it can be a really difficult one, especially if the artist has to graphically depict one of your books. I do not envy the cover illustrator his/her job one iota. I'm just glad that I usually have some idea of a book's content before I actually start reading it.

Now, I have a small complaint. I seem to be in the minority in my feelings about George Scithers having moved on to bigger and better things. Mr. Dozois does a good job, but I miss the balance of serious and funny, heavy and light, solid weave and fluff. During the Scithers days, if I felt like reading fluff, I could read fluff; if I wanted serious, I could read serious. And it was all between the covers of the same issue of the same magazine. By all means, keep the heavy. But try to lighten up a little. It couldn't hurt.

My only other regret is that I am going to have to let my subscription lapse. Finances are tight, and at the current time, I can't afford to renew. When I can afford it, however, you can be sure that I will resubscribe.

Thanks for letting me have my say, and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Bob Hill
1921 Harrison Avenue
Eureka, CA 95501

I'm sorry finances are tight and, of course, you will be more than welcome whenever you return. Candor compels me to admit that sometimes even science fiction readers and writers use rude language, but mostly, I think, it is for effect and not because they don't know any better.

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov:

In the Mid-December issue of *IAsfm*, you discuss metaphor and a letter you received from a reader who felt he was misled by the cover art for Harry Turtledove's *Agent of Byzantium*.

I feel you are being overly modest when you say that your knowl-

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edge of art is so little as to be beneath contempt.

A so-called fine artist is free to express himself in any manner he sees fit, whether it be super realism or vibrant blobs of color that somehow appeal to us. A commercial artist/illustrator is constrained by the product he is paid to promote through his artistry. This is not to say that a totally abstract piece of art can't be used to promote a product. The line drawn between fine art and commercial art is a fictitious one.

If an artist renders an automobile for the purpose of advertising, and he adds a glint to the chrome, an extra sheen to the paint, forces the perspective to make it look racy, and places the vehicle on a pink cloud (metaphor for a heavenly piece of automotive engineering), I'll not complain. I may be stupid, but I know that your every day, run-of-the-mill cloud won't support an automobile. But, if the slogan of the manufacturer is "The Thunderwad VIII lights up the freeway to happiness" and the artist adds a third headlight which casts a powerful beam into the heavens, I will be more than disappointed when I go to the showroom and find a car with two headlights.

I doubt that your letter writer would find fault with an illustration in which Macbeth washes his hands in a sea of red, or that he would be perplexed by the cover illustration for "Christmas Without Rodney," unless there was something in the letter to indicate that he was unreasonable or dull witted.

If an artist were to illustrate the tale of the Israelites spying on the Canaanites and he drew towering giants, and grasshoppers, would he be a "born-again literalist" or a metaphorist? It makes no difference, as it's a lousy premise for an illustration either way. Even with a blurb mentioning the Israelites, it would be ludicrous.

I confess, I have not seen the cover, nor have I read *Agent of Byzantium*, but if I were to see an illustration depicting a Byzantine warrior carrying a blaster and an electronic scanning device I would be intrigued and full of questions. I would want to know how he came by these items, how he would use them, to what purpose, and how would their use affect the outcome of the story? If, in the novel, the protagonist never comes into possession of these technological marvels, I would feel that I had been misled.

It's not a question of metaphor, nor is it a question of putting a lid on the artist's creative juices. If I see an illustration depicting a gang of scruffy hippies riding motorcycles, somewhere in the story those hippies had jolly well better mount up and ride.

N. W. Hines
Bothell, WA

Interesting that you talk about advertising. These days, television ads are very strong on cardboard breakfasts, mostly of the oat variety. To sell them, they show actors eating them and going into clear orgasms at the taste. Compared to that piece of systematic lying, a third, non-existent headlight on an automobile is nothing.

—Isaac Asimov

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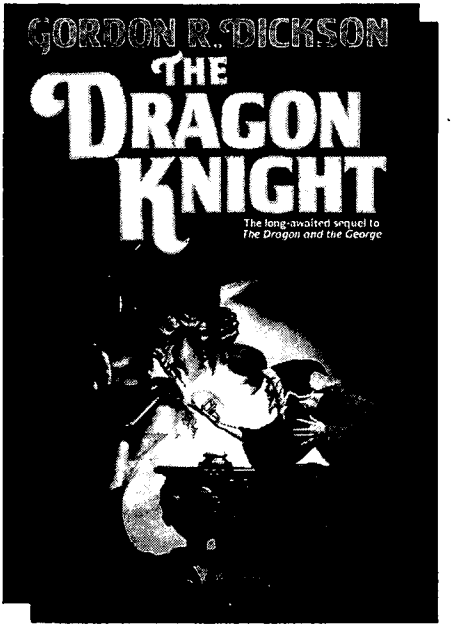

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

I've been a big fan of your magazine for many years now. In fact at 350 pounds, I may well be among your biggest fans.

I am also a book review junkie and I just have to write and tell you that Baird Searles is without a doubt the most dependable book reviewer I have ever come across. Without Searles' comprehensive reviews I would be unfamiliar with many of my favorite works: *Those Who Hunt the Night* by Barbara Hambly, *Deep Quarry* by John E. Stith, *The Complete Compleat Enchanter* by L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt, and on and on. The thought is almost unbearable.

Which brings us to Norman Spinrad whose articles have been unfairly criticized in recent months, mostly I believe due to Mr. Searles outstanding popularity. But while Spinrad's articles are very thought provoking, they still do not fill my most immediate need—to find the books which I should and should not buy. On a modest budget these are very important decisions indeed and a month's delay can be devastating. In Searles and Sprinrad *Asimov*'s has perhaps the best one-two punch in all of science fiction book reviewing. Wouldn't it make more sense, instead of publishing each one every other month, to go ahead and publish both authors' work side by side? Keep up the good work.

Peter Ashstein
Seattle, WA

The only thing I can think of that would make it difficult to publish both Searles and Spinrad regularly (aside from the fact it would mean more work for each) is that it would cut down on the space devoted to fiction and this might prove unpopular.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

It was with great interest that I read Mr. Rombough's letter to you in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* of Mid-December, 1989. As an unpublished writer, I too have views on the subject of editorial replies.

Although guidance on how to improve a story would be welcome with a rejection, it cannot be expected. I do not believe that editors have the time to read all the submissions they receive, much less critique them. Certainly writers, whose income derives from publications, do not have the time.

Mr. Rombough should haunt the science fiction conventions as I have. It is there that a new writer can learn about what it takes to be salable. One of the things that published writers have told me is that an editor will take the time to make suggestions on correcting a story that he wants to publish. But if the story is not considered salable for any reason, the polite rejection slip is all an aspiring author can expect.

This seems fair. There are many writers' workshops. Not all are as expensive, nor as time consuming as Clarion. Many are local, and very good. Your reply is a good one. The only way Mr. Rombough, myself, and the other unpublished aspirants will discover to which class we belong is to write and rewrite until we are sure. The only thing "a few key words" will do is put us

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a little closer to the just right re-write.

I would certainly love to receive those "few key words." But there does not seem to be any way that you could reasonably impart them to all of us and still do your job as editor. Please continue to edit.

Steven Lopata
Ridgecrest, CA

Your views are very reasonable, but you are wrong on one point. Editors do *read every submission they get, because they never know if they have a pearl otherwise. However, it is true they often need not read an* entire *manuscript. As one editor once said, "I don't have to eat a whole egg to know it's bad."*

—Isaac Asimov

NIGHT

Somewhere, computers find the correct images.
Clouds move slowly, birds fly and sing.
The sun sets in bright colors
behind the hill covered with trees.
Crickets begin;
you can almost hear the computer chuckle
as it finds a moment which corresponds with my past:
the meteor showers of my birthday.
I vaguely recall standing beside my parents,
watching the stars fall, my mother leaning over.
"Make a wish," she said. I did.
But it never came true.
Behind the breeze
is the smell of plastics and metals;
beneath my feet is the vibration of engines.
These images were once comforting, now
I grow weary of the deception.
I was only six or seven then, my last birthday on Earth.
It has been sixty-six years.
I am an Earthling and this is not the Earth.
I leave the holoroom
for the reality of the observation window.
Reality, yet this is as much illusion as any, for
here are a thousand, thousand
stars,
which can never be night.

—Roger Dutcher

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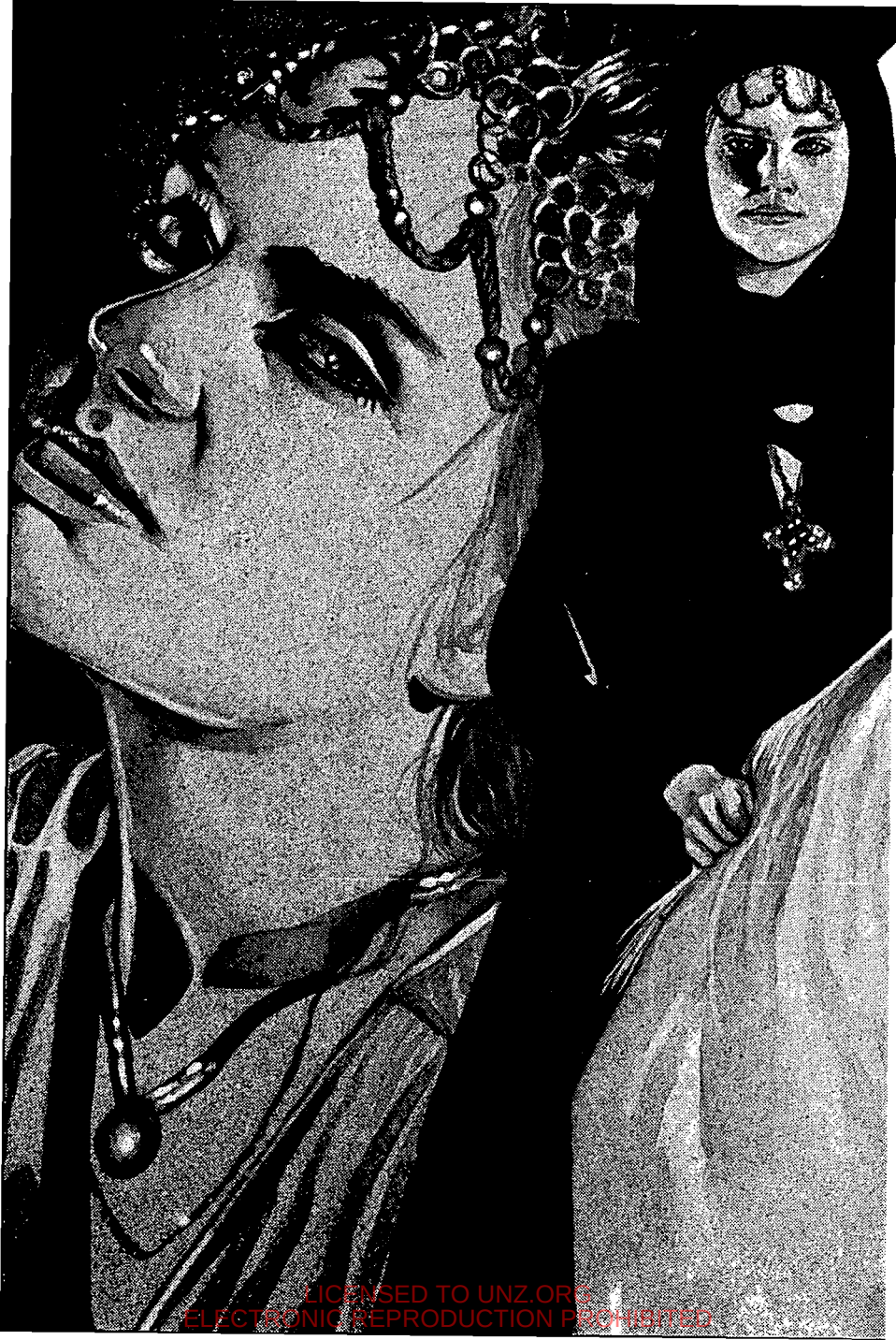

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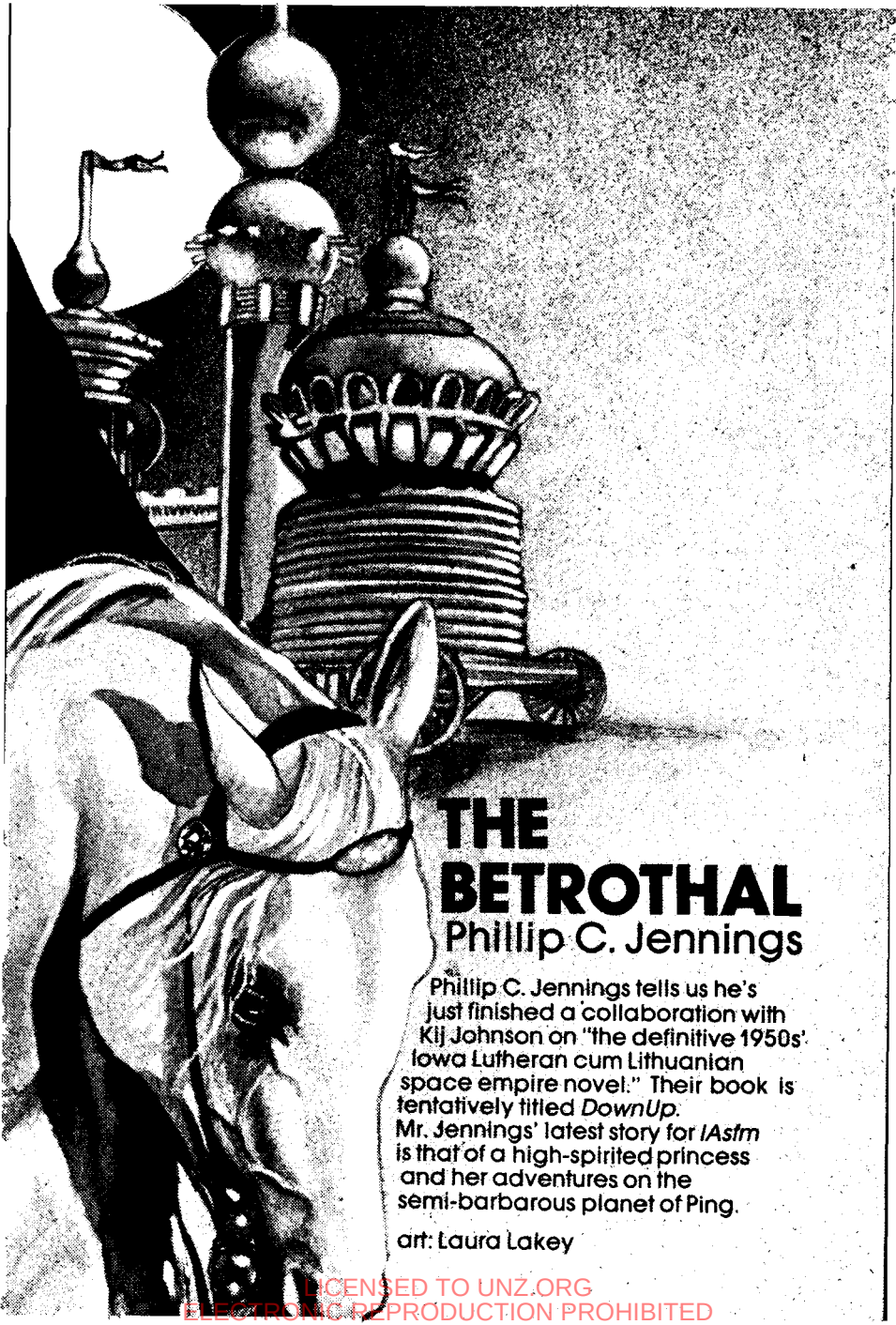

THE BETROTHAL

Phillip C. Jennings

Phillip C. Jennings tells us he's just finished a collaboration with Kij Johnson on "the definitive 1950s' Iowa Lutheran cum Lithuanian space empire novel." Their book is tentatively titled *DownUp*. Mr. Jennings' latest story for *IAsfm* is that of a high-spirited princess and her adventures on the semi-barbarous planet of Ping.

art: Laura Lakey

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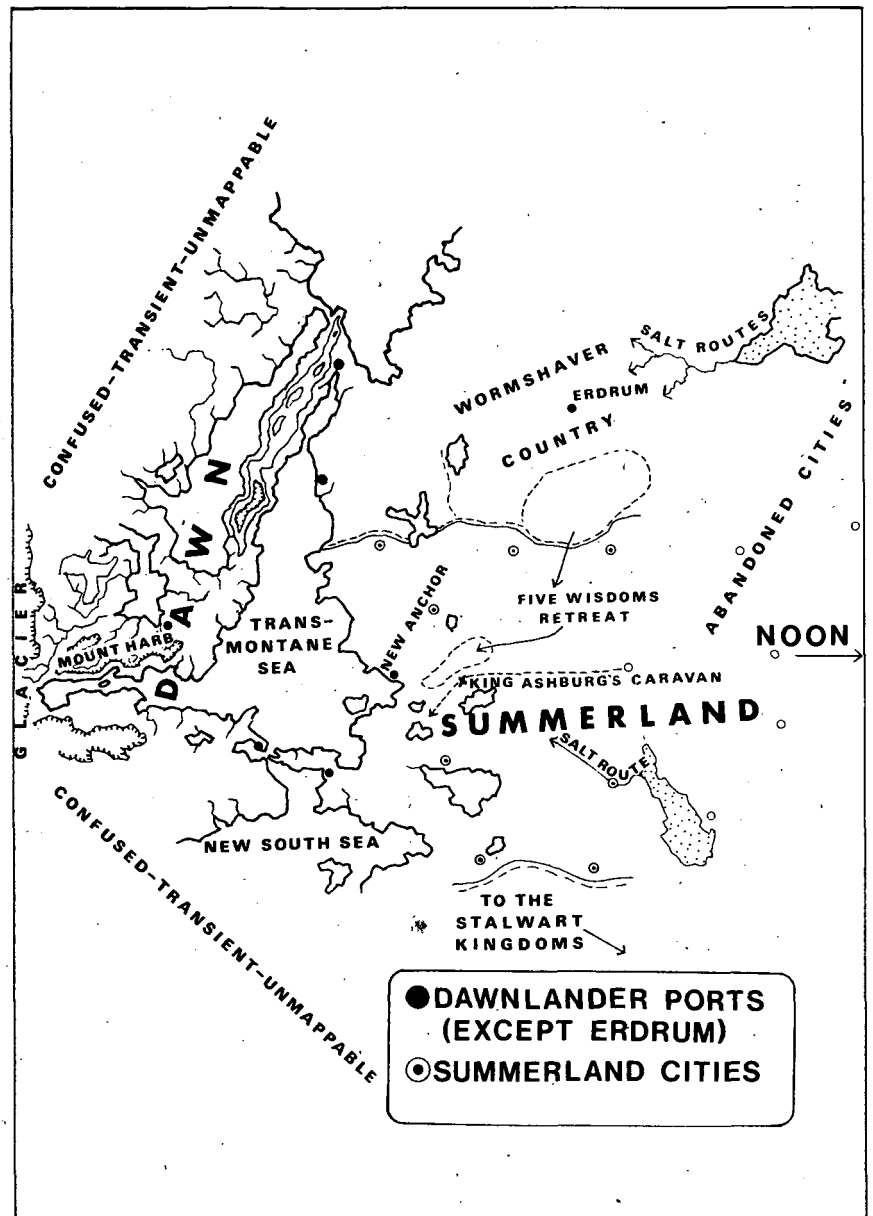

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I

I am Tersiz, daughter of King Ashbrug the sixth of that name; but who are *you* who reads these words? No one, for this is no letter to pass from one hand to the next. Hello, no one. Or more likely, hello sister-spy, trying to get me into trouble. If you have any shame, you will stop snooping NOW!

I will bury this after a time. We will settle into our new city, and I'll grow old there, and this manuscript will take on the dimensions of a book. Then I'll conceal it under a marker. Long after the city's death, its ruins will emerge into the Land of Evening, and a scholar of that unknown realm will dig these words up. Shall I address myself to her?—No, that's not how to begin. I don't know how to talk to someone wise, so in these pages I speak to my own newborn soul, and the better I do that, the less pleased I will be ever to make these words public.

I write normal letters, too. We all do, queens, concubines, and princess-daughters—we spend much of our shifts in literary composition. We have all too much leisure in the King's Wain, and entertain ourselves within strict limits. The red banner regiment rides to our left, and the white banner regiment rides to our right, and so our pent virtues are protected—somehow, even from the captains of the red and the white! And so we make much out of little.

But you, oh my soul, may not know about regiments and Wains. You may be a clean, swift soul of the Dawn, a hunter and a fisher, braving the distant seas. I may never stand on the shores of a sea—in fact you will be amazed to learn my scented toes have never trod the naked earth. In King Ashbrug's household I would lose status—I would lose all betrothability—if I should walk on common dirt when I am privileged to be carried.

This is Summerland, oh soul of the Dawn, a mid-morning country closer to your innocence than to the wisdom of Evening, but with none of your freedom; a land where farmers slave for kings. The ground rises here, shaking off the weight of your glaciers. The seas dry up, and where wetlands persist, our caravan's scouts take care to chose other routes. This is Summerland, with Prime a fat orange ball simmering at mid-height in the sky behind us. The King's Wain has many decks and balconies, all sheltered from Prime's hot rays, so that those of us who take the air will not darken our delicate skins under his constant light.

And so I sit in the half-outdoors, a bit bravely, because too much fresh air is also unconducive to a queenly pallor—yes, deplorably, the breeze brings a vulgar pinkness to my face. Worse yet, uncouth girl that I am; I use my princess-legs to amble here and there, even sneaking some

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exercise when those who might disapprove are shuttered away, or attending their soirees!

I admit it, I'm a rebel—everyone suspects as much. I think it shameful that anyone, no matter how highborn, should take pride in not knowing how to walk! The epitome of grace—to be flopped along to court like a swollen bladder, boasting of how many maids you inconvenience in the process! But perhaps it's as they say: I simply do my utmost to be opposite from Princess Pelötze.

You may not know this, innocent soul, but a King's Wain is a great building on wheels, with decks and turrets and bartizans and esplanades, and flags and awnings and signal-pennants. Yet because King Ashbrug has so many treasures, we must all be crowded together inside, so that our private rooms are mere walled beds, with room to sit, but not to stand. Our corridors are narrow and busy with servants, and if you take my point, you may agree that prisoners become shaped to their prisons. Very well, but there are degrees between necessity and enthusiasm, and Pelötze rejoices in her pampered freakishness. But no more about my rumor-mongering sow of a half-sister. She will not poison these pages.

What else to write about? Ourselves and our gossip, as if it were normal to be what we are. I know it is not. I have excellent eyes; from my heights I can spy the length of the caravan; Forecastle rolling its ponderous way ahead of us, and Salon following behind. Seedwains and picketwains and chuckwagons, Armory and Archives and Reliquarium, the field hospitals and the guildwagons—and the harvestwagons converging from flank and rear to feed our multitudes.

Far ahead, the Ramcastle clears our path, and the green banner regiment rides on its flanks. Far behind us follow the black banners, King Ashbrug's least honored cavalry. If I wrote a romance, it might be about a captain of the black, a more deserving hero than many others, though stupid princesses sneer cruelly behind his back. I could fall in love with such a man, but that would be disaster, because it is not mine to decide who I am to marry.

Or I could write about a student in the archives, a follower of the Pure Variant. Oh yes, long-haired and uncouth and truthful in his speech, not smoothly oiled like the Blues—almost all the King's courtiers follow the Blue Variant, our tame, obsequious, house-pet religion. They call Pures fanatics, but I have read the Pure Variant with open eyes, and it is utterly clear that these are the true words of Rebbo Jimey, spoken back on Day One.

In truth I should like to combine my heroes into a man of mind *and* body. Dawnlanders follow the Pure Variant, at least half of them do. And Dawnlanders are strong, war-keen men—but what would they want with a useless princess, given the choice of strong, war-keen Dawnlander

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women? No, if I'm to find myself a Dawnlander, he'll be a mercenary for hire, strangely unmarried, with the presumption to ask for a whopping big dowry. Such men work for my father, but I'd be a child to any of them, half their age. And our protectors take special care to keep those scarred and lusty brutes far from the King's Wain. Perhaps it's for the best.

Does it say anything about *me,* oh my soul, that I have fantasies? King Ashbrug has bred too many princesses. There are not husbands enough for us all to marry high, and we will not be allowed to marry low. Fantasy is all that's left. Fantasy and rivalry, and gossip.

II

We have a tutor. Rector Firpaol is not even castrated, but he's as nervous as a flitwing, with so much princess-flesh surrounding him. We are taught music, history, and logic, but he is never to test us except when we ask. The King's sons are treated far more harshly, but then they are expected to *use* their educations.

Pelötze rolls her bosoms at the man, and drops her pen to make him pick it up. Rector Firpaol is as juiceless a man as could be found, but she finds it important to keep in practice.

I feel sorry for him. And he is kind—when I volunteered to be tested in history, he was doubtful. What would my half-sisters say? "They'll say, 'it's just Tersiz, being odd again,' " I answered, and so he tested me. Naturally I gave Blue answers to all those questions about legendary King Arjath, even though the Pures say Arjath never existed. But Firpaol can trace my lineage back to the First King himself. Remarkable.

Unfortunately he's stooped, and not so young. And when any of my classmates "accidently" touches him, he leaps into the air. With time, he's developed a stutter. What a horrible thing, to be a tutor to so many princesses!

What else? These last three shifts went by without a Blue pageant; no ritual stations in this drab landscape. But, happily, the caravan is climbing into greener country; the tilt is barely noticeable here inside, but when the drovers change the ox-teams, our wheels are double-chocked. At a klom per shift, we are racing toward the Dawn-side frontiers of Summerland. This country used to be ours back in the reign of Ashbrug the First. Our scouts consult old maps to learn how badly three generations of Night-ice have scoured it. It would be auspicious of the King to replant his new capital on the site of the old—if Mount Harb is still there, and still useful.

We have to move like this and build a new city approximately once

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per reign. It's very accommodating of the Dawnlanders to put up with our sporadic migrations. Unlike us, they stick to their birth territory, letting us crowd in and irrigate for half a lifetime, and then move off again. (Excuse me—were I good at composition I'd amend this last sentence. I'd find some succinct, ironical way to point out that Dawnlanders are *adventurous* homebodies, traveling everywhere, but always returning to the same base. Whereas *we* are careful migrants, planting farms ahead of ourselves, and moving our population in well-managed herds.)

I'm telling the truth; the only remaining inhabitants of our former capital are a handful of very old Dawnlanders. Now and again we send them a wagon loaded with provender, and pick up their mail.

Such kindnesses keep the peace. Sometimes I wonder, if Rebbo Jimey hadn't founded the Dawnlander Friendly Society, would our two peoples be permanent enemies instead of permanent friends?

I have hazy memories of the old city, or perhaps I deceive myself. I was just a child when we abandoned the place. It must be even hotter now, ghastly in its emptiness. An ancient city, as old as a man's long lifetime, with those Dawnlanders scuttling about in their rags, their bodies bent bone and wrinkled leather.

Prime will bake them to death. They'll never live to see Evening. But no one forces them to stay.

Next shift, my father the King holds court in the King's Wain. When he wants to be martial, he rides in the Forecastle, the tallest building in our caravan. When he chooses to be the diplomat, he repairs to the trailing Salon. When he prefers to drink and fondle one of his women (or two, or three), he visits us here in the middle. So let me tell you what kind of man he is, whom I do not know in any other way, by noting that the Forecastle gets two thirds of his time.

This is how it should be with a young king, people say. Too much time with women is unhealthy, not conducive to a long reign.

Caravan kings are supposed to be young. It's what you do during the first part of your reign. Then you build your new city, and then you declare the succession and fade into a debauched retirement. But the truth is, Ashbrug is not so young as all that.

Oh dear, suppose Pelötze finds these pages? I should be disgraced for repeating all these truths. I shall hide you well, dear soul, and come back to you after attending my father's visit.

III

The wormshaver ambassador rides in the Salon, waiting to greet King Ashbrug and present her credentials. Wormshavers eat Stepmother food.

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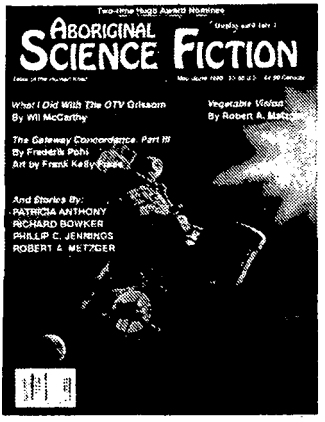

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They live somewhere off to north or south, and my father visits us to put off the moment when he will have to attend to the woman.

But also, I think, to take inventory of his marriageable daughters. At court an hour ago, his eyes moved among us, but what went on in his brain? There may be one or two whom he knows by name, but mostly I'd guess he counts us thus: *fat, freckled redhead*—that's Glahamet; *deep-voiced, chubby, mustachioed brunette*—that's Raodebätz; *tall, leggy almost-blonde, hardly fat at all*—that's me. So it goes, down the list; Südrel, Pelötze, Elaossa. . . . Is fat an asset or a liability? But perhaps I deprecate myself. Mother says men don't count it as fat, if it's in the right places.

Do wormshavers need to be appeased by giveaway daughters? What kind of daughter will they find most attractive? What appallingly crass questions! But depending on a father's whim, I might end up eating Stepmother food for the rest of my life!

You don't understand, soul of the Dawn? This world is our Stepmother, it had Stepmother life on it before we came to settle on Day Zero, but we brought our own food too, crops and herd animals. You're a Dawn soul, and you'll eat anything, but Summerlanders only eat food from old Eden.

I have not heard that wormshavers follow the words of Rebbo Jimey, in any Variant whatever. They are a very alien people. I have a list of things to ask Rector Firpaol about, and I will add them to that list.

IV

I have asked Firpaol to have a scout-map brought to me from the Reliquarium. I almost dared to ask that it be brought by one of the Reliquarium's staff, who might oblige me by being interviewed. But what if he were the Pure lad I fantasize about? Imagine what my sisters would say then!

Anyhow, the map came on brief loan. I'm copying it, leaving out all the busy verbiage, for this is a Blue map, and it has all sorts of stops and stations marked on it. Next shift we shall reach a spot described thus: *Brimmak's Footprints, from Day Three.* Brimmak, you see, had Big Feet. But somehow we will be solemn when our Blues ceremonialize around a stretch of pocked sandstone.

Most legends are self-serving—the more people are impressed by old King Arjath, the more they'll be impressed by King Ashbrug the Sixth. The Brimmak legend is an exception, unless it tells us to respect dumpy, homeless old ladies. She is our only immortal, and both her souls remember our homeworld of Eden. Those souls constantly argue, so that she seems always to be talking to herself. But this is nothing that people

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are obliged to believe, not part of any religion. We are allowed to be incredulous, provoking Rector Firpaol into flights of sophistry, using strange words from Edenic texts: three hundred sixty-five Days in a Year before Day Zero, two hundred forty Years in a Day after—but what's a *Year?* Ha! Here's the answer: a tad over one thousand ninety five shifts!

You'd think that on Eden, where things were perfect and the Habitability Index was 1.00, they could have made shifts just a tad longer, and had it come out a perfect thousand. Eden, where their Prime moved violently across the sky so fast no one could possibly keep up, and people endured Noon and Night many times in a single life—think how the atmosphere roiled from spinning! All that change must have confused our ancestors, or they'd have used language more clearly. Is Night the opposite of Day, or merely a black, cold hemisphere within it? Our rector maunders for hours on these topics while we giggle and wink and pass notes.

I have also asked Firpaol to find someone to lecture us on the life of a shepherd. But Pelötze wrinkled her nose. "We will faint from the smell," she said. *"Some* of us are bothered by muck and flies."

This is an allusion to my times out on the balconies, when I expose myself to the odors of the caravan, horses and draft-oxen being strong elements. But where does indoor air come from, except outdoors? Those animal smells are still there, though layered over with perfumes, spilled wine, and princess-flatulence. I would have said this, too, except I'd said it before a sufficient number of times for any open mind to hear.

So we will likely not be visited by any shepherds in the near future.

These are my projects, some productive, most stillborn. Others in the King's Wain have projects too. My mother's project is to see her first son moved up from third place in the succession, but also to see me blossom into the Greatest Beauty of All Time. My height may or may not trouble her. Princesses do not stand, therefore I have no occasion to loom over my shorter suitors. But these last hours mother is strangely exercised, calling me up to discuss my attributes and wardrobe. "What is it?" I asked. "Am I to be shown to the wormshavers?"

Mother sighed. "They are not even great among the many tribes, these ones who visit us. They have lost pasturage to their enemies, and ask leave to bring their—bug-worms—into our vacant lands. But they can do us harm. When they fight, everyone fights, so a tribe of twenty thousands has a huge mass of warriors."

I blanched. Mother is no scholar. She does not collect knowledge unless it is immediately relevant. In this case, her teacher could have been Ashbrug, who visited her bed after court, just last shift. "You would not have him give me away!" I whispered. "Not to *them!*"

"You must be prepared for anything," Mother answered. "But I think

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the King will make a lesser sacrifice. They are the petitioners, after all. It is up to them to give the larger gift."

A lesser sacrifice. "Pelötze?" If Pelötze were chosen, she would make it a mark of distinction. If she were not, she would mutter about the crude ways of wormshaver tribesmen.

Mother frowned. "These visitors are breeders. They breed their worms, and they breed themselves. Among their numbers are some whom they call their 'best blood.' They might become incensed if we gave them our worst blood to signify a treaty."

"I would need a retinue," I said. "I mean, this is for the sake of mere supposition, but I'd need someone schooled in religion. And a library. And a few maids. And a protector who could report back to the King if I were poorly used. That's just the beginning. What about foodstocks, and my own cook—?"

"And a mistress of wardrobe," my mother added. "Yes, our gift to the wormshavers will be expensive, there's no doubt of that. But there are twenty-one daughters, so chances are you shall be saved for some greater purpose."

And what might that be? There can scarcely be ten Worthy Realms in all Summerland. Twenty-one daughters, and ten places to farm them out! I think King Ashbrug will give one of us away, just to bring those numbers into better balance! But not me. My mother has a bartizan-window, and during my visit I did not see the dust of twenty thousand angry wormshavers on the horizon, which is the only thing that could make my father do something so unpredictable that I wouldn't find out beforehand.

No, but I *did* see a party riding from the Salon to salute a captain of the red. I watched, and they all turned to face the King's Wain, and the Salon-band whooped at our flank with their curlicued staffs raised high. They wore manes of fur, and no blue at all, and I think I may have seen my first wormshavers in the flesh. Short, moving by fits and starts, talking with mouths agape—I could not be less impressed if I found out that they filed their teeth! Perhaps they expected me to wave back. Pelötze would be proud of me—I was too princess-fussy and princess-delicate to do so.

V

Rain. As we roll Dawnwards it rains more, also as we scale into higher country. Firpaol has explained this all to us—wet, cold winds seek the low places, and hot dry air from Noon rises high. These conditions miss each other in passing, except where the ground lifts and pinches them

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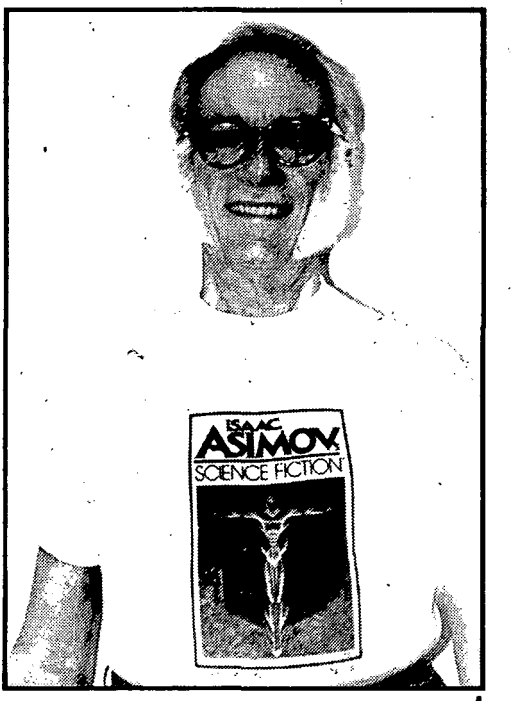

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together. When that happens, it rains. It rains most of the time around Dawn, and often snows. If we settle near Mount Harb, we may see remnant snow on its peak, and tell our children about it after it melts away.

Now and again I stick my nose to my barred window, to see the first trees of an approaching forest. I've never seen this species of tampered ponderbacks; it seems impertinent that I should tell you their history. As Dawn seedlings they grew toward Prime, carpeting the tundra like bushes, nothing more. You will remember this, soul of the Dawn, and you will remember how they tilted up later in their youth, as Prime rose in their sky. So here they are, out my window, and to you they have a more skyward angle than anything you've seen, but for me it's just the opposite. There is a grace to the curved trunk of a Summerland tree that these trees barely anticipate. A Summerland tree has rib-roots to support its angled weight; but the ribs of these trees are slim and few.

Well, I've exhausted that topic. I have done everything I could for a page, not to even think about the wormshavers. But now a race of whispers thrills its way past my little sleeper, and I can relax. "Glahamet," they say. "Glahamet visits the Salon, two shifts from now."

I feel torn. Suddenly, left is right and up is down. The wormshavers were a door, maybe. A way to freedom, and to their own kind of knowledge. They must be wise in the ways of Stepmother life, and in other mysteries as well. But these last shifts I've closed my soul against them. I don't even know what they call themselves! "Wormshavers" is our name, and actually somewhat deprecating.

Shouts from the downstairs starboard gallery. Glahamet is throwing bowls and platters, launching a tantrum. What a busy next few shifts for her! It will all happen so fast, the uprooting and everything, that she'll still be numb from shock when she and her new husband . . . Daughter of Eden! Do wormshavers even *have* beds?

Glahamet shouldn't be making this much noise. Now Firpaol will send word and bundle the rest of us off for class, far up out of hearing. I'd better pack these pages away.

Why Glahamet? The King had oils painted of us a thousand kloms ago. Did the wormshavers study those portraits? They'll be surprised—Glahamet is twice the person she was then.

Tact. Here comes the maid.

VI

Guess! Rector Firpaol was not alone! Pelötze practically went into seizures, there was this *beautiful* young man with him! "This lesson we're going to talk about something new," the stranger said, and Pelötze wrig-

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gled artlessly, letting her paband slit open to reveal one of her corpse-white calves. What's the name of that condition, where lymph drains low into the legs and they swell like flabby balloons?

The visitor was Blue, or else he adopted it as a color of convenience, his own heart deeply concealed. "—It's called *strategy,*" he continued. "And strategy is an important thing to think about when you're in charge of a caravan. Now, suppose you were an enemy, and wanted to attack us. How would you do it? *You!*" He pointed at Princess Südrel.

"We aren't supposed to be tested on anything," Südrel answered huskily.

The young man gave Firpaol a look. "I teach by asking questions," he went on gamely. "Very well, would you line up all your men and give them swords and pikes, and have them run at us, yelling obscenities?"

"I'd have them pray to Rebbo Jimey for his favor," Pelötze cut in. "That way, if they lose, they won't end up in hell." She took a deep breath, but did not quite manage to pop out of her bodice.

"You m-may have to use another m-m-method, Dafka," Firpaol commented, controlling his stutter.

Dafka did something wonderful with his dark eyebrows, so that he seemed warmly amused and savagely intellectual at the same time. "Here in the real world, hordes are not pious, nor are they suicidal," he told us. "They will not throw undisciplined, part-time warriors against our professionals. Instead, they will harass our farmers, raid and burn their harvests, kill our scouts, and eventually leave us blind, immobile, and hungry. Meanwhile they will give us no targets to strike, but in our anger and desperation, we will eventually send off one or two regiments on a fool's mission. When we are thus weakened, they will strike at our wains."

"This is why we worry so much about the wormshavers," I said.

"Exactly." Dafka looked at me—and colored? "Now you know why these negotiations are so vital. But diplomats are peculiar people, experts in misunderstanding each other. Though it's true that neither we nor they gain any advantage by fighting, our mutual overtures take the form of repeated blunders and apologies. The time may come when one side or the other can no longer summon the spirit to apologize. It is my job to ask each of you not to contribute to this tension."

"He speaks by way of rehearsal," Rector Firpaol explained. "Dafka has to go downstairs and persuade Glahamet to compose herself. She seems upset. Do any of you have useful suggestions?"

"Candy," Südrel responded. "Crystal Sweettooth."

"Opiated Sweettooth," I added. "Yes. Seriously."

Firpaol cleared his throat. "Dafka will be accompanying our—bride—on her travels. He hopes to do a d-d-dissertation on the wormshaver way

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of life," he said. "The more he knows about Glahamet, the m-more congenial . . ."

I think Pelötze sighed the loudest, but there were others. "Opiated Sweettooth and the consolations of religious scholarship," Princess Raodebätz interrupted. "That ought to do the trick." Raodebätz's voice is as deep as a man's, but her sentiments were clearly female and universal among us princess-daughters. With Dafka at her side any of us could easily immerse herself in an orgy of piety.

It was time to get his attention. "Who else?" I asked. "How large is her retinue?"

"Too late for you, Tersiz," Pelötze sneered. "You've made yourself gaunt as a peasant, and now see what happens when our father has need of a royal pulchritude!"

Dafka waited politely until the Fat Sow was done. "There are two staffs, male and female. The King has decided on three men; myself as steward, with a scout and a Dawnlander escort. We shall certainly be outnumbered by maids and what-all."

"And you'd travel with the ambassador, back to their—camp?"

Dafka smiled. "One wonders what to call it. A pavilion. A caravansary. Something more romantic than 'camp.' Whatever I write about them, it will be best to be as flattering as possible."

Class continued, but all too soon it was necessary for Dafka to go and perform diplomatic magic on the sodden, red-eyed Glahamet. We were left with Firpaol. That was only an hour ago, but I can't remember what he lectured about.

"Too late, Tersiz," Pelötze said. She may be right. Of all the young government clerks riding back in the Salon, how many come close to being handsome?

VII

I lay asleep when suddenly the King's Wain began to increase its pace, the axles protesting with groans and shivers. I thought it was another earthquake, but then someone came along, whispering the news.

Well, no. Whispering: "nothing to fear, just the King's command for haste. Glahamet's come back. What a disaster! She fell asleep right at the ambassador's table, and plopped face first in her soup!"

This was probably not true, but the stories grew wilder. Poor Glahamet had other things on her mind than to give a blow-by-blow recitation of the humiliations she'd suffered, so others did it for her.

Then some real news began to leak in. It turned out that the worm-shaver embassy included an anonymous young man of no particular title.

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Except that he was the prospective groom, his the best blood they had, and when he saw Glahamet—well! "Not this one," he said. "I saw the one I spoke of in a high window, and she had yellower hair. *This* one is an insult! Look at her! She lost her metabolism at puberty!"

He has a name: Yadmos. If wormshavers *did* have a king, it would be him, but for the time being they've chosen not to. It's a queer system, but Yadmos must be kingly, because he certainly isn't diplomatic!

They are insulted by *us,* and *we* are insulted by *them.* It is not the done thing to spurn a king's daughter, nor to lurk like a spy, like a play-actor! It would have been better if Yadmos whispered his sentiments, and his ambassador found a way to sweeten them before passing them along. But they cannot admit to having blundered, and their feelings are all the more prickly because they did.

They have left/are leaving the Salon, rumor isn't sure. So now what? A mustering of the tribe's twenty thousands?

I've had it sworn to me three ways, that Yadmos really did speak of a yellow-haired princess in a window. If this is true, somewhere a lot of loud wrangling is going on, and the upshot is that within this next hour the fate of King Ashbrug's only semi-blonde daughter will be decided.

If I don't hear a rap at my screens pretty soon, it'll probably mean war!

VIII

This is not the time to neglect this manuscript, but you can imagine how busy I am! Right now I'm insisting on my library, and clerks scurry to the Reliquarium to copy books for me. But King Ashbrug bent close and put his hand on my shoulder, and breathed wine-fumes in my face, and said: "it is not altogether against Our wishes that you should take some extra shifts of time in gathering your needs."

I suppose it's one way of punishing Yadmos and his tribe. Oh, he's cock-of-the-walk right now; he's got "the best" by being pushy, and making mere Summerlanders cave in to his demands. I never realized that we daughters were so much public property that it was common knowledge who was the most valuable, and who was the least, but there you have it—we are naked quantities, our virtues measured to the third digit of exactness by multitudes who have never seen us!

I think I've told this part rather badly, and left out the drama: the rap at my screens, and my interview with my father, sitting upstairs in his shirt, bare-legged at my mother's desk. "It's good that We irritated them with Glafnet," he said, getting Glahamet's name wrong. "Now they'll be doubly inclined to celebrate. You *are* beautiful, you know."

I was speechless. Ashbrug went on. "Have you heard of a Dawnlander

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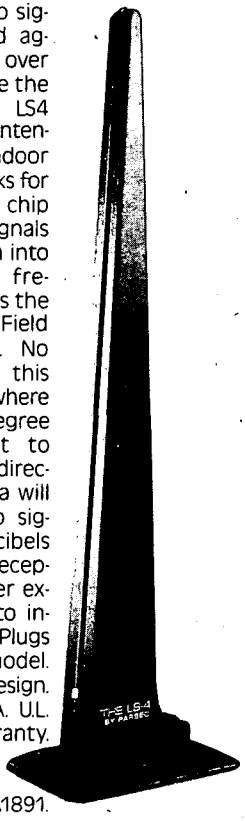

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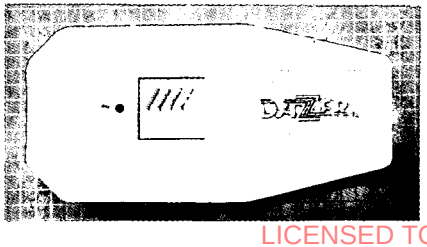

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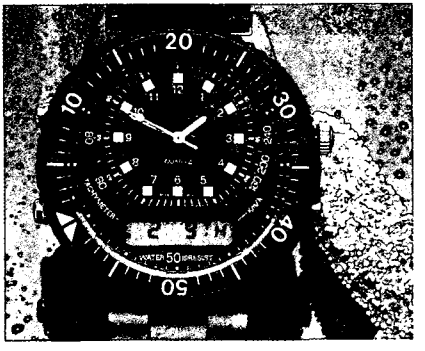

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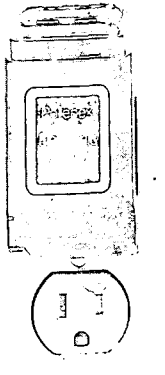

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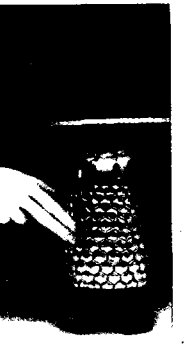

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named Hilf Däthentum? There's no more famous fighting man to be found. We've given him special instructions. You must always trust him."

"I will," I croaked.

"And Trekmaster Laodincz will be your scout. You'll have two wagons, and six teams of horses. The spares can be worked a bit; if you're not averse We advise you to learn how to ride."

"Thank you."

"It's a good team We're giving you, and a rich dowry," the King continued. "But you'll be slow, right? The timing—if you get to where you're going before the tribal muster is complete for the wedding, then it's bad drama. Better to keep them waiting. Make sure you copy all the books you need. Make sure your wardrobe is complete. Women insist on their own ways with time. Then too, Laodincz might take an easy but circum—circo—a roundabout route."

Dear soul, you sense that our session together passed oddly, with Ashbrug blurting advice and looking at me in puzzlement, wondering if he hadn't made a mistake. Afterward I was moved up here, into an airy apartment with its own outside portico, so that I'd have room to deal with packing. I'm quite relieved—imagine having to encounter Glahamet after all this! What would we say to each other? But different elevations are different worlds.

Dafka is coming to visit soon, so I must neglect you, oh my soul. I must make lists and anticipate all my future needs. As if I could imagine my future life as a nomad!

IX

Nobody wants to be reminded of the events of the Salon, so my first exposure to Yadmos, and his to me, was differently arranged. Other people ride, but princesses are "conveyed," and by the workings of this verb I embarked and debarked again, into the Forecastle's aftergate.

We ate in that wain's most elegant refectory, a martial place of regimental standards and crossed pikes and dark gleaming wood, where even the dogs sat at attention until summoned to eat our sops. The first thing prospective lovers have to know is whether they can stand the sight of each other at dinner. Yadmos handled his skewers very well.

He's short, small, dark, and roundheaded, and has lots of "metabolism," which is important—a thoroughbred virtue. His beard is long and black, but grows from small parts of his face, lips and chin and jawline near the ears. These several tails and mustachios go their separate ways, like the barbels of a fish. I know it sounds ugly, but what a hot and lively fish he is!

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He found it important to tell me of all the things he knew how to do, a long list of skills. I endured his bragging, knowing this was the man who spoke so uncouthly in the Salon. He's graceless, but also nervous. He did want to impress me, and just couldn't figure out how to do it!

He's the one who needs drugged candies, not Glahamet! But while we ate he waved his hands at high tempo, and those hands were rough, hard and square. Maybe he can actually do all those things; ropemaking, smelting, sounding out springs, compounding chemical essences . . .

He spoke of Stepmother life, of creatures that ought to exist because they would be useful extrapolations of the insect form. "The difference between Earth insects and the worms of Ping is not absolute, except that our larvae feed off Stepmother vegetation," he said. "I suppose they're more primitive; they retain the ancient segmentation. We all evolved from segmented worms, did you know that? But the Pingian forms are plastic and easily bred. See those furs? Insect hair. See how it shimmers and rainbows? I can sew, too. In the Five Wisdoms Muster we're all obliged to sew our own torqueries."

What could I say? That among us sewing is so utterly female that even princesses are allowed to do it? And I, uncouth rebel, do it slowly and badly? Yes, let me blurt these truths, and challenge his maleness, and sneer at his accomplishments. Always I censored myself, which made me seem taciturn and cold. Cold against his metabolic heat. Still, I'd wish Yadmos knew how to censor himself. I'd happily become less careful, if he'd become more.

After chattering off in six directions he came back to the worm thesis, and spoke of giant caterpillars that build reservoirs deep underground, pools in which they live through the hotness of Noon until they reach Evening, where they emerge and transform—into what? Sometimes lakes disappear, and whereas we talk of evaporation, Yadmos's people talk of worms that tap and drain.

I don't feel much for Yadmos, except that his nervousness is contagious, so I found his company uncomfortable after a time. But I would never hurt him. I think he can easily be hurt.

I've written these lines, and twiddled my pen in thought. Something came to me. I've mulled it over, and I'm convinced it's true.

Yadmos is terrified of me.

I suppose this is how great love affairs begin. He made some impression on me, that's for sure. Except for the noodles I was slurping when he started to talk about segmented worms, I haven't the least memory of what I ate.

I wonder why I'm not afraid of him? The little Pelötze hidden inside me says he has no dignity. My answer is that dignity is a game, too expensive for his tribe to play.

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My blood may add dignity to his. He may never be a king, but his son . . . ?

X

My fiancé, his ambassador, and those others came to our caravan by horse-and-wagon, whatever their usual mode of transport may be. And I shall leave with two wagons of my own. Let this be background. Now add this—I've gotten presents every shift: music boxes; some kind of laminated bathbox in which I might crouch to soak myself (I crouch so seldom I don't know if I've spelled the word right); insects crusted over with jewels, trained to hug one's bosom like a brooch . . . do you understand, dear soul? All these gifts are a way of saying "You've got more room, *you* carry all this gorgeous clutter back to our home mustering-place!"

Dafka stares at my bundles in open incredulity. A beam with a block-and-tackle looms from my high portico. We shall use it to winch my stuff down. But first, maids.

I have a maid problem. None want to come with me. So the King's heralds have done me service, and I am interviewing the strangest assortment of—well, there aren't many women for whom the job of lady's maid in a barbarian camp is a step up.

Trekmaster Laodincz's niece is coming; a lanky child who makes me feel fat in comparison. (She's finished growing *up,* but has yet to start growing *out.)*

Aside from her, there's Mother Chalmao, who in her livelier youth twirled her parasol on many a stage, and sang and danced, but was not quite a whore. My mother has checked into her past, and assures me of that. And then I may have to take on a gigglesome pair of apprentice glaziers, who are obliged to leave that profession due to sheer window-breaking incompetence. None of these people know anything about being a maid. I am not sure any will survive my training.

I asked Dafka if I shall meet Hilf, or my trekmaster, before we leave. "No," he answered. "That won't be necessary." But I should like the change: to meet someone good at his work, and not have it be an interview. "Let's have them to tea," I persisted.

Dafka's eyebrows did magic again, and made me know that neither Hilf nor Laodincz were accomplished in the tea-room graces. Wine, then? But there are unwritten laws in Summerland, and the foremost is, not to get a Dawnlander drunk in the heart of the King's Wain!

So the interviews go on, and get worse. Enough. Four wretched maids may distill into one good one, and one good one is sufficient.

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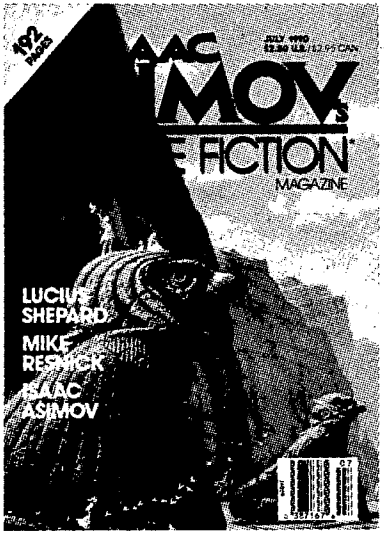

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XI

We are off! The shift-horns blew, the wains were chocked, the oxen got a rest, and the Blues had their ceremonial along the slanting trees. King Ashbrug made his representations and passed around the golden cup, and it was formal enough that many Summerlanders think Yadmos and I were married then and there!

Except for the carpets and thick-strewn flowers, I stood on ground—on solid earth. Will I be able to call it "earth" among the wormshavers, who use that name in place of Eden, and are not too dignified to call our own world "Ping"? (The joke is that Ping was named for the sound of the machine that discovered it, back on Day Zero.)

Very well, then, I stood on solid Ping, and wove a bit on my feet, because I'm used to the rolls and jounces of the King's Wain. But fortunately most of the time I was allowed to sit like a normal princess, and did not betray my lack of grace.

It was an ecumenical ceremony, meaning that one or two Pures were there, and even a few Browns, who refrained from shouting: *"Abomination! Abomination!"* I don't think Browns can be tamed, exactly, but they were washed and tightly buttoned and kept quiet. This much the Blues can manage, but no delegations from the Little Singers blessed my departure, and no witches.

So King Ashbrug gave me away. Mother cried, and some of my balconied half-sisters cried too, waving their scarves. Firpaol gave me a book copied down from old Eden itself (the usual boast of venerability), and now I'm off, rolling backward along our path, waving in review from time to time.

Here comes the black-banner regiment on their proud horses!

XII

There go the blacks, for some perverse reason my own regiment of the heart. Yes, and I shouted at them: "Take care of my father!" and they rattled and clanked and raised their standards in enthusiasm.

What's left now? The landscape behind a passing caravan is heavily rutted, and thick with dung. We startle huge flocks of birds as we drive, sometimes passing a harvestwagon going the other way.

Laodincz's niece sneezes from the tufts of feathers and molt that snow down everywhere, poor teary, swollen-faced girl, bereft of her parents, embarrassed because I'm moved to take care of her when it's supposed to be the other way around. But do not dare to call me unselfish! It's just

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that others might learn how to serve from my example. They'd better; I'm not as forgiving of stupidity as I am of allergies, even if neither condition can be helped.

Young skinny Aorril snuffles and honks under a blanket now, sipping her tea, and I have called for a map to mark our course. My two gigglemaids seem unable to find it. So what shall I talk of in the meantime, Dawn soul? Your mighty relative, Hilf Däthentum?

Very well. He is pale blond in hair and beard, huge in shoulders and rib-girth, and speaks little. Typical hero—how would an enemy behead him, when he hasn't got a neck? But Hilf moves his mass with deliberation, and has developed his own slow grace, almost a gentleness. He has the opposite of Yadmos's "metabolism," he could sit still in rain or sun for hours if it were necessary.

What creatures of legend I ride among! Yadmos the dwarf, and Hilf the giant! His eyes are intelligent, but he closes the door on me—he will not let me see into those eyes. I think his soul is very close to the surface. I could capture it, and he doesn't want that. Perhaps he was hurt by women before.

His hands are outsize even by his own measure. His fingers are like sausages. But two are lost in battle.

As for Laodincz our scout, he's a lean man; not yet well formed in my consciousness. He fits well on a horse, and dashes off, and rides back intermittently. His face is weathered, his eyes squinty with thought, and the part of him that holds his brains is almost too lofty. I will never ask him to talk about himself, because I can tell that he's not that kind of person. But I fantasize about *his* hands too. I must be a hand-fetishist. Men's hands—Dafka's are rather white, with long fingers, very agile. Why should I blush when writing about *hands!* So many hands, of so many types, and all of them *good* hands. I hope.

As for my Yadmos's hands; the ambassador of the wormshavers keeps her party at a modicum of distance. From a height any spy would know we were half-separate and half-together. Perhaps Yadmos will ride over to visit. Perhaps I will ask for my first lesson in horsemanship, and ride over to him!

Those damn maids *still* haven't found that map! Oh—Daughter of Eden! Of course! What are they to do—they can't read!

XIII

I got my first horseback ride last shift, sitting astraddle a tawny orange beast named Flowerpetal, obviously the gentlest that Laodincz could find. There are special words for horse-colors, and I'm trying to remem-

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ber—"sorrel," that's it. Flowerpetal is a sorrel, and we rode around at a walk, and our convoy of wagons had to stop or it would have outdistanced me. I have considerable success in bossing humans around, but Flowerpetal knows it's all bluff, and takes advantage.

Anyhow I rode for less than an hour, before my legs and hips started to seize up. Women are looser in the loins than men, and have less trouble adapting to horseback, but it was trouble enough.

During my adventure Yadmos came to accompany me and Laodincz faded back (pretty hard to do considering my own slow speed). We talked about the beauties of the world; romantic talk of the shapes of clouds and the scents of wood-smoke, and the music of tree locusts. I am suddenly enlightened. (Where does this wisdom come from?) But assuredly it's true, Yadmos feels nervous indoors. Any wormshaver would. Their diplomatic gaffes and dinner talk of segmented worms and such, were all part of an out-of-control indoor nightmare, but now they're free again.

Flowerpetal made us laugh; meandering, pissing, snorting, showing Yadmos's horse her teeth in an evil smile. It was a good short time we had. I was disposed to end it with a kiss, but holding the two animals in parallel and then managing the necessary tilt was beyond my skill—I didn't want to fall off. I got the point across, though.

I returned to my wagon sore and tired, but emboldened. Courage is a horse-gift, it comes from riding on something so big that submits to your will. In this boldness I made a decision I'd have otherwise delayed, to send my two hapless giggle-maids back to the caravan.

Aorril and Mother Chalmao are both serviceable and may become my treasures, all the more because they like each other. It may be the difference in ages, but Chalmao certainly has a motherly air, and Aorril is so starved for a parent that they've begun to adopt each other. Chalmao's warmth is the perfect complement to Laodincz's reserve. Our trekmaster is a responsible uncle to young Aorril, but cold, cold.

My maids talk of giving me a bath after the manner of wormshavers, immersing myself in that gift-tub. They will heat water over a fire to make it comfortable. I shall take that bath with princess-aplomb, naturally. Chalmao assures me that baths aren't unhealthy, and the custom has died out among Summerlanders for other reasons. To this Dafka assented, computing the weight of water needed to wash so many caravaneers, and how transporting that volume would burden the oxen and horses. Back in Days One and Two, people built temporary bath-houses along their routes, but when so many naked people assemble, there are suspicions of immorality.

"Suspicions!" I know I shall feel very wicked, myself, but I pretend to be too innocent to have a sense of sin.

I like listening to Dafka, but I keep my eyes vague and angled when

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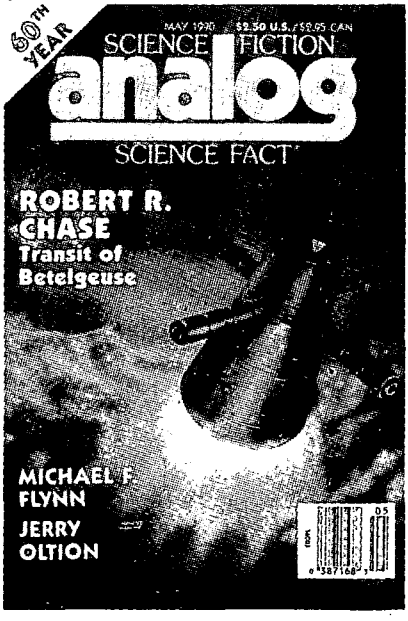

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he talks, because otherwise he colors. It is exasperating to find weird ways of showing that I'm attentive, and embarrassing to both him and me when he turns red. He's no child, for pity's sake! We shall have to talk about this. It has to do with pretense, I think. Our roles of bride and steward cannot survive much more. I liked the lofty Dafka who lectured twenty princesses, but what am I to do with this hot Dafka who is overwhelmed by just one? Yet he's such a help to me, and I need him.

He is so very attractive, too. But despite that it isn't me. It's not *my* blushes that are making a mess of things. Perhaps I don't understand—well, what the books call love. The madness of it, when everyone would be so much better off being reasonable. I just hope Dafka hasn't read too many of those silly romances.

More rain. We all crowd under the awning. Aorril has decided to serenade us. She is deft on the shamitar, and Mother Chalmao can sing. No more privacy. Time to put these words away.

XIV

The sheets came from the ambassador's wagon. Aorril and Dafka set up the frames, and tied them on. Soon we had outer walls. The tree was my roof, and more sheets were strung from rib to rib to make the inner sanctuary. Midsheets separated the outer and inner gaps and guaranteed my sacred female privacy.

Chalmao built the fire. Hilf carried in the water and left. The breeze made our walls flap and belly out; the sound of it lively and patternless, stuttering drums and snapping whips.

I stood in all this and thought: how alien! How different from the King's Wain! How light and free! I walked about, trying to learn pedestrian grace, but I defeated my purpose by drinking wine. I was nervous, after all. I was soon to be naked and vulnerable, and the protection of sheets is—let me be frank—excitingly inadequate.

After too much wine, I sat down. I had a place of cushions, and Firpaol's little Eden-book to keep me company, and after a time the first bucketfuls began to boil. Mother Chalmao stirred them into the tub. "Ready!" she called. She came over, got me undressed, and I stumbled my way toward steaming doom.

I grimaced and eased in. It seemed terribly hot at first, yet a few minutes later I called for fresh buckets to make it hotter! I learned to use the slants and distortions of my tub to stretch out a bit, and relax. "You don't have to heat any more buckets after this," I told Chalmao when she poured the new water in. "When this cools, I'll be ready to get out."

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So she went to join Aorril, guarding the middle passages of this sheet-maze. They made music for my entertainment, and theirs, and for the men who camped beyond my outer walls.

I scanned side to side and drummed my fingers to the rhythm. Hardly a minute passed before a dark-masked lover slipped through a sheet-gap and crept to my side, holding a finger to his veiled mouth. My eyes widened with alarm. He reached. . . .

. . . I stretched out my arms, and he lifted. So this is why men have those overbuilt shoulders! I'd thought it would take Hilf Dathentum to bounce me out of my tub and onto my towels.

I nodded toward my cushions, deep in the crotch beneath the tree. He was furtive enough to hurry there while I wiped myself, gathered my clothes in a bundle, and jiggled pinkly over to join him.

We kissed. His hands ran over me, up and down. "Dear Dafka," I whispered. "I can't give myself to you. Never as much as Yadmos. This must have limits."

"I know," he said. "But for this little time—tell me you don't hate me. If I were better born—"

"It's not hate I feel. Never that. But it must not grow into love."

"I love you," Dafka answered.

"No you don't. You love a fantasy princess. I've let you touch the reality, and next shift we may remain fond of each other, but your disease of the heart will be on its way to a cure."

"I love the real you," Dafka persisted. "I won't make trouble, don't worry about that, but I love you despite that little brown mole on your left hip, and the almost insignificant gap between—mmm—your front teeth."

"You're making trouble now. Oh! Oh, that feels good! Daughter of Eden! Dafka, you must go. Chalmao will look in on me at any time!"

Dafka shook his head. "Mother Chalmao knows all forty-one verses of that song she's singing, and has only reached the seventh. I have her promise to keep on at least till thirty, unless you make a protest."

"Yes, but—Ohh!—you don't understand. There's a language of winks and nudges. It may be I've got another visitor on the way!"

"Yadmos?"

"Who else? How promiscuous do you think I am? Please, go! And don't get caught. I want you safe for the future."

And so Dafka left. I straightened up, toweled my hair, and tried to figure what verse Mother Chalmao was on now. Eleven, by my count. On verse fourteen Yadmos slipped to my side. How he did it without magic or secret tunnels, I'll never know. "You startled me!"

"Shh. Let me release the energies knotted up in your centers. You have

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fires to dry yourself from that bath, fires like Prime himself, but we must find them."

And so Yadmos went looking, with wonderful method. I thought it only legitimate he should enjoy me more than Dafka, even if Mother Chalmao should have to sing all the way to verse forty-one. But oh, the difficulties both of us had in keeping quiet! The noises I wanted to make! How did the world refrain from hearing the thunder of my pounding pulse!

In fact the world suddenly became very quiet. That same moment Yadmos scurried and vanished. More magic. I sat up, dizzy and breathless. Who? Where? Mother Chalmao appeared at the sanctuary gap. "Well! Out and dry already! You might have called for help. Here, let's get you dressed and repair the damage to your hair. It's all tangled—we'll be an hour brushing it into shape again."

After that hour, Laodincz blew the shift-horn. We were off again. I've learned that baths are very exciting, but I think I'll wait six or eight shifts before having one again.

XV

We have begun to pass groups of wormshavers on their way to the wedding. What is odd is that we are passing them at wide angles. We roll on Laodincz's "roundabout route," calculated to bring us to various high promontories every rest-shift.

Yadmos and his ambassador are persuaded that we must make a dramatically late arrival at the "muster," and they follow our example. This dance of delay requires coordination, and the exchange of information, and on my third horseback excursion I saw how it was done.

I came upon Laodincz simply sitting on a high, shelving rock, glinting a hand-mirror toward a distant hill. That hill glinted back at him. What it told him I might guess; routine scout stuff. *Who* is *where*.

I don't know how many languages of mirrors there are, but I suspect it's one code per kingdom, and one per tribe. I rode closer, free of concealing brush. Laodincz had Prime over his shoulder, and I saw now that he used *two* mirrors to make the glints go to the direction he wanted, the first one fixed on a tripod. "Please rein in, there's a cliff here," he warned me, without even turning to look, his body all hunched attention. In the King's Wain we princesses were nervous about our gossip network, but Laodincz wasn't the least embarrassed to be caught doing this part of his job.

Afterward he mounted and accompanied me back to my wagons. "How many more shifts, then?" I asked.

He frowned, and made an intricate calculation. "Eight." He paused

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before continuing. "The ambassador should leave us in six, to ride ahead and prepare."

Then his face went placid. Such slight animation as he'd shown before seemed lively, compared to now. It frightened me, that mask of his. Could I crack it, somehow?

Then *he* cracked it. "Aorril—it's been a long time. This is the first I've seen her happy, the first since she was sent to me.. You are a kind mistress. I am—grateful." He made it sound like a farewell, and confused me more when he spurred his horse and rode ahead, but then he let his reins slack until I caught up. In a rolling landscape horses sometimes progress by fits and starts, so Laodincz's little seizure wasn't entirely freakish. We could pretend it didn't happen.

"Your niece is almost a woman," I answered, to keep him talking. But it didn't work, and we reached camp in silence. This man speaks better by mirrors than mouth.

The trouble with being secretive is that it makes people think you have a secret. Is that the only thing that disturbs me about our encounter? No. What bothers me more is that by this chain of mirrors, we are ultimately in touch with the caravan. I can imagine many cheerful ways of exploiting that contact, but they haven't happened. So what's going on in place of chit-chat? Something more sinister?

Sinister that Laodincz has called Hilf off into a rocky place for a conference. Sinister that those two figures seem to be arguing.

I must give this up now. Yadmos and I are going to assemble a sailboard. Next shift we reach the hard flats our caravan crossed so long ago, where sailboarding is possible, a favorite wormshaver sport. Thanks to Ping's reliable noonward winds, we may encounter whizzing fleets on the way to our wedding!

XVI

I write this sitting on a deservedly sore rump, not much later. But where were we? Oh, yes.

Hilf Däthentum left his quarrel with Laodincz and proceeded to get drunk, and shoot us furtive glances from his distance. Meanwhile Yadmos explained all about wheels and bearings, and the caliber of metallurgy that makes sailboarding possible. "We used to buy this stuff at Erdrum far to the north; we can't make bearings ourselves. But there are no steady sources, so a family's sailboard is often its most precious possession."

"You should train those abyss-worms you talk of, to delve for ore."

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"Ore is one thing, machining is another," Yadmos answered. "But we have hope in one of our special breeds, insignificant though they seem. Do you know that we can train one, then chop it up and feed it to another? Then guess! What do you suppose?"

"A *trained worm?*" I found it hard to imagine what a worm might be trained to do.

"—the other worm remembers the training! Multicellular larvae as long as your thumb, and they can eat information! Think! We are working up the size scale, breeding for hypertrophied brain tissue. I hardly dare dream of what our Five Wisdoms science may deliver to the world someday! Ping will have something even Earth never knew—"

At this point Hilf stood, and shambled over. He looked at Yadmos's sailboard and scratched himself here and there. "How old do you think I am?" he asked, apropos of nothing.

"Uh . . . not yet a grandfather." How should I guess a Dawnlander's age?

"Old enough to retire from mayhem and slaughter," Hilf said, and hiccupped. "With a pension. I've done enough." And then, because this seemed to set his mind at ease, he stumbled off to finish his wineskin.

Yadmos stared at his back, as if he'd been accused of contemplating mayhem, and slaughter were a wormshaver specialty. "Retire, then!" he said, keeping his voice safely low.

I thought better of giggling—it might be easy to make fun of Hilf, but it wouldn't be right. Or wise.

The shift ended with a session of preliminary sailboarding. I can make the thing go windward, and have mastered two kinds of falling over, much to Mother Chalmao's distress—the damage to my arse can be concealed, but it will be more difficult to repair my manicure. I can come to a more dignified stop by riding into grass, and I hope grass is always available on the flats ahead, or else the wind may accelerate me faster and faster, out of control!

XVII

We saw some sails on the Flats of Neverhoe—last wedding stragglers, it seems. They whizzed by at a distance, toward the forest, reading the flags on the ambassador's wagon: the message was *please, spare us the humiliations of an audience.* Actually, yellow-black-yellow is more multipurpose than that; it can mean *plague,* for instance. It definitely means *keep away.*

I would not care to compare my weight to Yadmos's, but I am taller, so why should it embarrass me if we are much the same? But that means

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we use the same dimensions of mast and sail. Those dimensions would tell those who watched us that Yadmos had got himself a hefty bride —hefty for a worm-shaver. I didn't know that I should be sensitive about this until someone told me, but it seemed pretty subtle to someone as scared and excited as I was.

In many ways, sailboarding is more thrilling than taking a bath! But soon I learned to empty my sail and slow to a near stop, so that I could sail noonward without too much peril of overspeeding, even avoiding a few rocks and dips.

In fact I never got up to what a wormshaver would consider normal velocity, so I was startled after some minutes, when I decided to turn around—my wagons were practically out of sight!

I'd never been alone before in my life! I could shout, and absolutely no one would hear! Panic made me clumsy. I tried to remember everything Yadmos told me about sailing into the wind. It goes against all logic that such a thing should even be possible, and I thought it would be very tricky—too tricky for me, anyhow.

I was right. But then I got the rhythm of it, nothing to boast about, and learned about a new problem: a zigzag course is just plain longer, with more chances of obstacles. Veering to one side of a wineberry bush, or to the other of a clump of fragile shattercups, tends to bollix everything up.

There's nothing intrinsic to sailing into the wind that makes you slower, in fact Yadmos gave me a very complicated explanation of why the fastest sailboards do their best rates into the wind. So it was just my ineptness that made my wagoners give up on me after a time, and start rolling to pick me up.

My prayers were answered! I managed to stop shaking from fear and frustration before they could notice, and told myself that I'd just endured a great deal of fun. When Yadmos rode to my side, my smile was genuine—a smile of joy, and intense relief.

Damn it. I write all this down, and the feeling that burns in me now is that I want to try again, until I've got this thing mastered! It has me so obsessed that I don't want to write about anything else, no more subtle nonsense about people's feelings and moods. This is a dangerous state of mind, especially because people do seem edgy. We're marking time now, not even pretending to get up to speed, using excuses like my manicure to justify frequent halts.

Hilf spends much of his time polishing his sword. If he's so nervous, how could he have tolerated letting me sailboard off practically out of sight? It's as if protecting me isn't his job. Is it more important to protect my *dowry?* Against whom?

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XVIII

Dear soul, you can imagine that if we feel tense here in these wagons, wormshavers bred for "metabolism" must be going ripe mad over in theirs. This shift the strain finally got to the ambassador. She has gathered her coterie together to ride off and announce our coming.

Leaving Yadmos behind, almost alone.

With that departure the agony seemed to end. We are not *relaxed,* exactly, but the level of anxiety went way down for a time. It may be starting to build back up, though.

I sound as if something could be measured here, a quality of the air. But it was very distracting to have everyone so brusque, with lists of things to do. I felt rather in the way.

So I retired to the dark, screened interior of my wagon and called Dafka to my side for serious spiritual advice. He began by sliding his hand up my leg; meanwhile I voiced a criticism of the Blue Variant, and asked him how he could believe that King Arjath actually existed?

He snuggled closer and began unbuttoning my paband. "Admittedly our oldest sources are unclear. 'Arjath' may not be what he called himself. The Day One custom was for kings to take on royal names—"

"If he was—mm!—the first king, how could there be any customs at all?" Saying this, I planted a few kisses on his face and eyebrows.

He sidled down to answer into my unstrung breasts. "There were kings in Eden," came his muffled reply.

And so we debated, until I declared myself victorious and ordered him to become Pure. I feel very relaxed now, but there's the matter of being fair to Yadmos. As soon as I finish this, I'll ask for another horseback lesson, and perhaps things will develop until my favors are balanced.

XIX

Yadmos was not to be consoled. He couldn't explain his distress, if that's what it is. He compared it to a sickness.

I told him it was pre-wedding anxiety, and suggested wine. He looked at me in surprise. "I hadn't thought of that!" This is a big difference between wormshavers and Dawnlanders.

Oh, I should say that my horse-excursion ended in boarding Yadmos's wagon, so that you don't imagine our conversation taking place under a canopy of leaves, when in fact it happened under a canopy of stretched silks. I haven't taught Mother Chalmao that part of a maid's duty is to be her mistress's chaperone, so in fact it was just the two of us, pretty far back from the driver.

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But nothing happened. Yadmos drank some wine, and said, "This is my sleep shift, you know."

"I should adjust mine to yours," I answered.

"—Although how I'll get any sleep—everything on edge like this . . ." He sucked some more wine, lips right to the skin, and rolled his eyes at the taste. "Did you know my mother disapproved of this mission? She thought we were better off battling our enemies than seeking refuge in your Summerland country. But it would be our last battle, and then what? Men killed, women and children enslaved. All our science lost."

"Will I meet her? Will she approve of me?" I asked.

"She's dead." Yadmos said this matter-of-factly, no explanation. But I got the impression that those who lose important wormshaver policy debates are expected to die.

He went on. "She would have despised you. Your people have not truly adapted to Ping, while we have made a religion out of adaptation. We know science, but you mock us because we are nomads."

"Not me," I whispered.

"I would not say these things if I were in my normal mind," Yadmos admitted. "But you should know the hidden feelings that lie beneath what people are willing to say. Your beauty, your dignity, your humor—these virtues will make our ill-disposed hate you even more."

Another suck of wine. "You know what it's like? Two teams, one good at chess, another good at hoop-ball. We can't get your team even *interested* in hoop-ball, where *we're* the masters, so all you think about us is that we're second-rate at chess. Sorry, I'm being harsh, and you don't deserve it. How will this work, Tersiz? How can two people as different as us ever think of getting married?"

"We'll do it to save your people," I answered. "To make peace. That's what I was bred for, Yadmos. To be a symbol to cement peace. Are you saying that it can't work? Because then I'd better go back and tell my sisters that they've endured a lifetime of prison for no purpose whatever!"

"No," Yadmos rolled his head. "I'm too frazzled to guard my tongue, and so I've upset you. I don't mean to strike at your foundations. We will marry—but then what? Unimaginable. We are approaching something I have no wisdom to see through. Tersiz, let me rest. I think I *can* sleep if I finish this wine. Next shift I'll be better."

So I left, thinking again on the vast scale, about kingdoms and tribes, wars and diplomacy. It's as if I'd forgotten how, until Yadmos reminded me.

Do we need to be frightened of his tribe's enemies? We have given some useless bits of Summerland to a horde of losers. What price might the *winners* demand?

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XX

I woke to a shrill cry, and a thump. We rolled on, while I pawed for my clothes.

Then I crawled to the front of the wagon. The driver obligingly slid up from his box to his higher dickey, as is his habit when I want to sit out in the sun, browning my skin and bleaching my hair.

I looked over and saw Hilf driving Yadmos's wagon, or rather, reining in the horses so that it slowed and fell out of sight behind. This puzzled me. I meant to investigate. "Laodincz!" I shouted. "Would you fetch Flowerpetal for me?"

He—shook his head! *No!*

"What's the problem?" I persisted.

Dafka moved to my side, pale and worried. "Don't be so loud!" he whispered. "You'll alarm your maids."

Aorril and Chalmao slept when I did, but it seemed a strange way of telling me not to wake them. "I heard a noise—" I began.

"So did I. And I saw—maybe I shouldn't say." Dafka looked to Laodincz for guidance, but our trekmaster rode at a distance, face forward, unperturbed. As if he were in the habit of denying a princess' "request."

"You'd better tell me," I warned Dafka.

"Hilf rolled the driver's body off that wagon. That's what I saw."

"He *killed him?* Then Yadmos—!"

Dafka's voice fell to a whisper. "If Hilf means to kill Yadmos, can you stop him?" We looked up to my driver, who aped Laodincz's face-forward pose. "How would he dare kill that man? And why? It's *you* who travel with so much wealth—"

"And it's already under Hilf's care," I answered. "Dafka, it's a plot. Hilf and Laodincz—and you?"

"No."

"Then help me. We must wake the maids and find what we can; knives, pokers, anything. Then we tumble out the rear and run—"

"I think not," Dafka replied. "If Hilf and Laodincz are in on something together, another conspirator is named King Ashbrug. We would be traitors to the caravan to do anything but what they ask."

I shook my head against this confusion. "Laodincz: Come here."

My trekmaster rode over and nodded at the driver, and we all came to a stop. "What's going on?" I gestured to our rear.

"An hour ago I got a message," Laodincz answered. "The news is extreme, and Yadmos is excitable. After Hilf ties him up, he'll be harmless." He paused for a time, looked me in the eye, and then said: "The marriage is off. It was never really on."

Dafka squeezed my hand, perhaps for support in my state of shock. I

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pulled away. "Why—what does all this mean, then? Lies? Just a game? For me to be *used?*"

"For the sake of your people." Laodincz reined his horse to the left and spurred him off, back to join Hilf, who was just now rolling up in Yadmos's wagon. "She knows," he told the big Dawnlander.

Hilf nodded. He did not look my way.

Facts sank in. Laodincz waved forward and our wagons began to roll again. I bent and started to cry, to pound my knees in sobbing anger. I'd indeed been used, if I were made a party to a false betrothal, and *used* in a terrible way, my freshness tarnished—who could ever trust being betrothed to me again? The story would spread, I was a trickster's pawn. My marriageability was sacrificed, my one chance, as part—

—of what? War? It had to be. A war my people planned. A surprise attack! A war I'd not been told about, a battle we'd avoided by taking our strange, roundabout route. Could it be something so drastic? I tried to think otherwise—this was all part of an elaborate scheme to humiliate Yadmos, to insult him as he'd insulted my father in the Salon. But Ashbrug could have done that without involving *me!*

Still, there was one reason to think there was no war, no battle. I had to ask, clinging miserably to one feeble hope: "Why are we riding forward into danger?"

Only Dafka heard, only Dafka could make sense of my words. "Ask them, please," I pleaded. "Find out, because—because otherwise . . ."

"I know, I know," he said, not knowing at all. "Sir! Trekmaster!" he called, to summon Laodincz close again. "Why are we continuing on this course?"

"It's part of the plan," Laodincz answered. He looked at me, and saw that I was furious at myself for crying. "Princess, there are arguments that are not yet argued. You have made Aorril happy. I would spare her the sights ahead."

"You want me to ask my maids to leave me?" I paused. "—Yes. Yes—of course. Give them—horses—whatever—"

"You are kind. Thank you." As if he couldn't have just given orders for the two to be bundled off.

He could have ordered me to be tied up. I'm no longer in authority here, and can only guess how far I am from being a prisoner. My guess is, not very far.

I cried a second time, to see Chalmao and Aorril leave me.

XXI

Small troops of black-banners saw us at a distance. They shunted aside,

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Laodincz riding ahead to warn them away while I was told to keep in back. That was earlier. The land is falling toward a soggy river valley, and there are woods ahead, ghoul-birds circling too thickly in the high air.

We come from the Noon side of things, and the wind blows to us. The smell is ghastly. Here we have stopped for a time. Inexplicably. Now Laodincz rides back to the wagons. "It's all clear," he says, and we are moving forward again.

All clear. I assume that means no witnesses. Dafka and I sometimes hold hands, and shiver together. I have to put this down now. We've passed our first bodies, and I can't write.

XXII

The smell of twenty thousand corpses! They weren't swollen up, for the most part, not much. They were too fresh and too perforated for that, but the gasses inside used the same wounds to escape. I was not the only one to vomit.

The ground was soft. We left ruts, and the liquid that pooled in those ruts was thinly red.

The bodies lay heaped here and there. They were gaily dressed for the expected wedding. Twenty thousand! When two thousand armed horsemen rode down from the south, what fraction of that multitude was armed?

One supposes they had four or five thousand men of fighting age, but did they know where to run to find the muster's armory? Did they have time, on foot?

The answer, obviously, was no.

We may have taken slaves. I pray this is true, that we didn't kill the youngest and the sweetest. But at best this is an atrocity!

"They should never have threatened us," Dafka whispered. "Never pressure a king when he feels vulnerable. What choice did Ashbrug have? To give in, and let the world know how easy it is to terrorize a royal caravan?"

"Their mistake," I said. I couldn't summon the feeling to sound bitter. I was simply numb and empty. "Poor Yadmos's mistake. No wormshavers allowed in Summerland."

We stopped near a great circle of trampled tenting. Hilf went into his wagon and dragged Yadmos out by his bonds. My once-fiancé thumped to the ground like an oversize cocoon. From where he lay, his eyes stabbed me through.

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"Bring her over," the great Dawnlander shouted to Laodincz. "It has to look right."

"Hilf, think about this," Laodincz answered. "I've got your precious parole here in writing, it's yours no matter what promises you made. There's no need to kill her if you're leaving Summerland anyhow. Think what she's worth in the stews of Anchor Town—a virgin princess!"

"I'm rich already, without dealing in slaves," Hilf answered. "Rich, retired, and free, but only if King Ashbrug doesn't hire some assassin to do me down. Remember what he said? He needs to justify *this* horror. Nothing less than a blood-eagled princess will do."

Hilf turned to me. "Sorry, miss. Never met a princess I liked before you, so I shook on the deal. I don't advise running, those legs haven't any practice. Please step down."

I did, but Dafka scrambled practically over my head, and moved out in front. "Fight me first!" he said. "Give me a weapon. I challenge you—you'll have to kill me—"

"And I will, boy. Tersiz, do you want his death?"

I gulped. My mouth shaped "no," though my breath wouldn't come. I don't know what kept me from fainting. My body added to all these others, murdered by the look in Yadmos's eyes.

But now his look grew comprehending, and I was spared. "No!" I cried again, and "Please!"

"Step aside, Dafka," Laodincz ordered. "Didn't you take a clerk's oath not to handle weapons? Move over, damn it! Give me room."

Laodincz swung down from his horse and drew his sword. "Hilf, it's me, see? *Me* you'll have to kill if you won't be persuaded, and that's going to be a sight harder than you think. I'm telling you, a blood-eagled woman isn't recognizable worth a damn, so find a corpse the right size and we'll dress her up in Tersiz's clothes. Hack her face, and everything's fine."

"Why are you doing this?" Hilf answered. "You think Tersiz wants to live so bad she'd whore in the stews of Anchor Town?"

Laoodincz turned. The decision seemed up to me. I tottered forward. "I can't go back," I said, my voice barely carrying. "Not when my father wants me—dead. A sacrifice—what worth am I to him any more? A mouth to feed for the rest of my life, because nobody'll be fool enough to marry me? One more excess princess?

"No, he wanted to bring the count down in the King's Wain. Being killed to justify this slaughter—that's an acceptable way to do that. But becoming a laughingstock king because his child was sold into whoredom? He won't appreciate that, and he'll take his retribution."

"So it's death you choose?" Hilf nodded in grudging respect.

"Well . . ." I answered. "—Actually, the way I feel, making my father a laughingstock would be the first small step in a long revenge. Tell me,

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though, will Dafka live? However this thing sorts out, will either Dafka or Yadmos survive?"

"No."

"So two good men die. For what?—Just so you can retire, with my dowry as your pension? Was that the deal? It was, wasn't it? Hilf, if you were working for the right person, you wouldn't *want* to retire! You're not that old yet, your reputation is still at its peak."

"And who would be the right person?"

"Yourself, to begin with. And then—me."

My eyes fell to where Yadmos lay staring, sick with horror and fear. Enough of this! I moved toward him and fell to my knees. "Yadmos, I promise. If Hilf lets us live, I'll bear you a king for a son, and if any of your muster still survives, have them use him as they elect. There must be a few still free, and more enslaved who'll some time escape—let me do this, in marriage or dishonor, however you choose."

"Fine words!" Hilf grumbled. "—Laodincz, you still pointing that sword at me? Look, by the time I've chopped you up, Dafka and Tersiz'll be scarpered. I'll never track them down in time for those witnesses the King's arranged to see them."

Laodincz labored over his words until they made sense. "Then let them go free."

"But *why?* Why are you doing this?" Hilf asked.

Laodincz considered and made his answer. "Because Tersiz was kind to a scrawny, no-account girl who never knew kindness before."

"Ah." Hilf stood in thought. He scratched here and there. "—After all this, you going to keep on working for Ashbrug?"

Laodincz shrugged. "Do you know an alternative? Would you care to share that dowry with me?"

Hilf sucked on his teeth for a few seconds. "We could buy a ship. There's enough for that. A seaman can make fortunes sailing cargoes north and south."

"I can read maps, and keep accounts," I said. "Gentlemen, that's *my* dowry you're talking about. Not to mention using one of my good pabands to disguise a corpse."

"*What are you talking about?*" Dafka yelled. He grabbed my arm. "Quick, while Laodincz's holding them off. Let's get away from these—these—"

"Murderers? Dafka, the king of all murderers won't let you return to the caravan alive, to spread the truth—"

"*I know that!* But—"

"But five partners running a cargo ship can probably make a decent living. And King Ashbrug can hardly be angry with four of them, if the

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guilt for his daughter's loss of status falls on her head alone. That's how it'll be if she's the one the other four call 'captain.' "

Hilf turned from Laodincz to Dafka, to me, then slowly lowered his sword. "I'm not sure how I lost control of the situation here. Tell me—it's going to work out I don't have to kill *anybody?"*

"Six," Laodincz responded.

"Huh?" said Hilf.

"Six, with Aorril. Seven with Mother Chalmao. Even more with the teamsters here. You take care of things, and I'll ride back to get Tersiz's maids. We'll rendezvous at Black Hill. Hilf—don't you understand? Your ship's half crewed already, and the way it looks, by giving them shares you don't have to pay a single one a salary!"

"Me?—but this 'Captain Tersiz' business . . . she said—"

"Good, I'm glad you've seen sense. But don't untie Yadmos for a while yet, not until we get to Black Hill. I *think* he's sane, but I don't know for sure."

At this, Yadmos went into a frenzy, trying to say "no" through a bound mouth. "Can we just hear him out?" I asked. "If he'll be one of us—"

"Do it, Dafka," Laodincz said, pointing and then sheathing his sword. My steward bent to untie Yadmos's gag.

"The worms!" Yadmos croaked. He caught his breath and tried again. "We must take the broodstock along. I can take care of them, it won't be hard. Lifetimes of work, of genetic manipulation—they've got to be saved! Please! If the muster is destroyed, at least let the fruit of our Five Wisdoms survive!"

"How can we find worms in this shambles? And why? For *science?"* I asked, incredulously.

"For the sake of immortality, someday. Not in our time, but perhaps by Day Twenty? World Souls to eat our dying and preserve their memories, their knowledge, their spirits—oh, it seems so foolish to dream the old dream in all this carnage . . ."

XXIII

Much time has passed since Black Hill came and went. I'm a trimmer, browner princess than I was, and I can hike with the best, although soon I'll be off my feet again.

We have reached "Old" Anchor Town, on the former shores of the Transmontane Sea, a sea now six kloms distant across fields of shingle and mud. We are negotiating the purchase of a stranded hulk, a large and serviceable cog. Ships are made in the knowledge that seas rise and

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fall suddenly, and this one can be dismantled, although not easily. We'll need workers here, and re-assemblers at New Anchor.

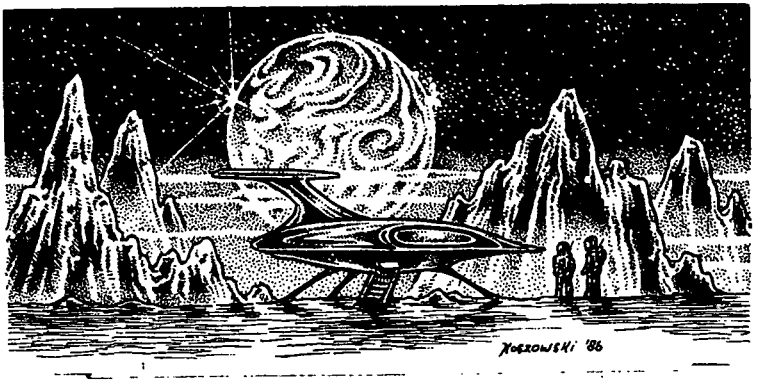
The cost of their hire, and of the hulk, is less than the cost of a working ship—there aren't many of those left on the shrunken Transmontane Sea after the recent earthquake, and nobody's selling. There's an incredible amount of wealth to be made, here and on the New South Sea—the ocean that the Transmontane Sea bled half its volume into was similarly emptied of vessels by the surge of waters, and several Dawn ports were flooded. Nature's terrors are almost as cruel as my father's, but the upshot is that guild merchants are starving for trade.

I haven't much time to spare. This may be my last entry for a while, but I do have other news to share with you, about Yadmos and I. Eden knows we worked at it enough, and yes, we are to have a child. I've consulted one of the witches here in Anchor Town, who says by the taste of my urine that it's likely a boy. Money back if she's wrong, but my guess is she makes her living being right half the time.

Yadmos takes good care of his worms, and all my maids and men take good care of me, Hilf most especially. I am "Captain" Tersiz, and to make that title more palatable to our Chairman, it's agreed that he's to father my second child, who will be my first son's giant champion and protector. My first son, the king-avenger of his extinct tribe! What dreams we dream!

The ship must become ours, she *must!* Dafka assures me our bid is the highest! We have already named her. I was tempted to call her the Fat Sow, because the way she lies keeled over on the ground reminds me of Pelötze couched at court, but how could I love her so much if she were anything less than *The Freedom of the Seas?* She will be a new life for all of us who have suffered from the old.

Dawn soul, I grow more like you with every hour. ●



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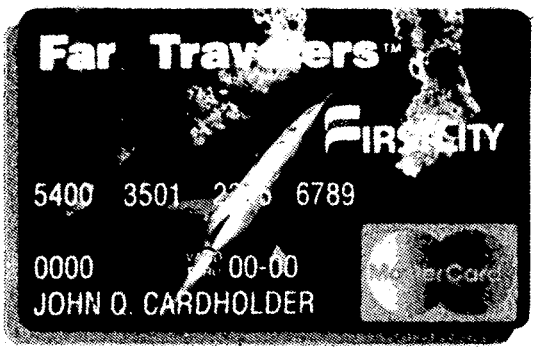

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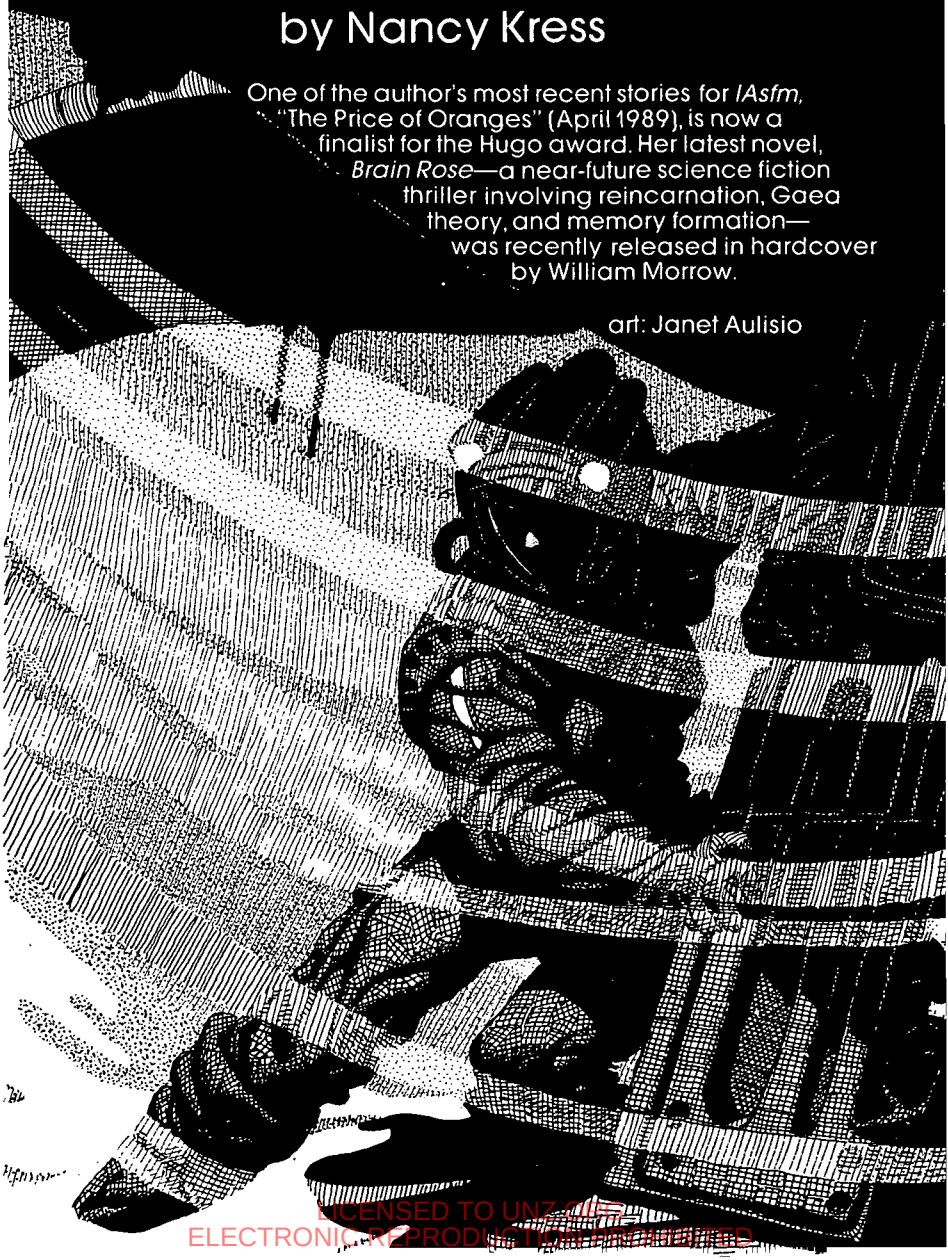
TOUCHDOWN

by Nancy Kress

One of the author's most recent stories for *IAsfm*, "The Price of Oranges" (April 1989), is now a finalist for the Hugo award. Her latest novel, *Brain Rose*—a near-future science fiction thriller involving reincarnation, Gaea theory, and memory formation—was recently released in hardcover by William Morrow.

art: Janet Aulisio



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Maria told me that Team B had found Troy. It took me a moment to find the right answer (all we had found was Tokyo), and in that moment there was no way to tell how unprotected my expression had been. But I did find the answer. "That's impossible. Troy was *early.*"

"Nonetheless, Team B found it. Excavated ruins."

"It wouldn't be big enough to carry any points!"

"It's on the exception list."

"I don't believe it."

Maria shrugged, watching (what had my face shown?) "So access the channel."

"But there wasn't anything *there.*"

"There were enough exposed excavations or whatever to be on the list. Three hundred points. Leader just made the official acceptance." She smiled at me sweetly. "He said he was pleased."

Bitch. She knew I didn't access the open channel as often as she did; I work best with uninterrupted team-channel access. She also knew that Team B Leader had been my second husband. Her background psych research was always thorough. I toggled my 'plant to "record" and made a note to bid for her next season.

Tokyo was worth only forty-five points. *Anybody* can identify Tokyo, even starting from a fucking Pacific Island.

My Team Leader's voice buzzed in my 'plant. "Time's up, Cazie. Come on in."

"We have another four hours!"

"Touchdown city by Team A. Quarter's over."

Maria smirked; she was on Team A. Her 'plant had of course already told her about the touchdown. No appeal; someone on Team A had actually done it, gone out and touched an artifact from one of their cities. I turned away from her and pretended to study my console, my face under careful control. *She'll say it,* my 'plant said, programmed for this. The programming had been expensive, but worth it: No point in giving away rage if you can be warned those few seconds in advance that let you get your reactions under control. A few times the 'plant had even been wrong, audio context analysis being as uncertain as it is. A few times no one had even said it.

Maria said it.

"Don't be too upset. After all, Cazie—it's just a game."

Flying back is the part I hate the worst. Going out for the first quarter, of course, you can't see anything. The portholes are opaqued; even a loose chair strap could disqualify you in case it might let you glimpse something. During actual play, you're concentrating on the console readings, the team chatter as it comes over your 'plant, the hunches about where

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to search next, the feints to keep your flyer-mate off-balance. Especially the feints. You hardly notice the actual planet at all, even when you play in what passes for daylight.

But flying back to base, the quarter's over, the tension's broken, and there's nothing much going on over the 'plant to distract you from the place. And God, it was depressing. Even Maria felt it, she of the alloy sensitivity. We had been playing a day game in Tokyo; the computer flew us west, into the dying light. Ocean choked with slime or else just degree after degree of gray water, followed by great barren dusty plains howled over by winds of unbreathable air. Continents' worth of bare plains. Nothing hard, nothing bright or shiny, nothing cozy and compact. Just the bare huge emptiness. And overhead, the constant thick clouds that make it impossible to even guess where the sun is.

Once I told Ari—now Team Leader B—I wasn't sure the game was worth the aftermath, it was so depressing. He stared at me a long time and then asked, in that sweet voice that meant attack, whether the openness frightened me? And we were still married at the time. I said of course it didn't frighten me, what was there about such a dead world that was frightening? I kept my voice bored and disdainful. But he went on watching me anyway. And that was when we were even still *married.*

"Nothing," Maria said. She stood deliberately staring out the porthole as we whizzed over some dead plain. Showing off. Thinking she was outpsyching me. She even made a little song of it: "No-thing, no-thing, no-thing."

I didn't look at her. Maria smiled.

At the base we all gathered in the dome while the computer reffed the first quarter. The four members of Team A had found Sydney, Newcastle, Wollangong, Capetown, Oudtshoorn, Port Elizabeth, Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. The touchdown was for Sydney, but it was only a piece of bent metal, not a whole artifact, so it wasn't worth a lot of points. They had a lot of cities but the team had concentrated on coastal cities, which aren't worth as much overall because they're easier to find and to identify (although they did get extra points for Hong Kong, because it had sunk so deep).

Team B found Troy, Istanbul, Thessaloniki, New York, Yonkers, Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk, Edmonton, Calgary, and Chikon: high initial points but a big loss after reffing because the North American cities were so close together and because they had misidentified Chikon—*twice.* I watched while the computer announced the adjusted score, but Maria went on smiling and her face gave away nothing. Neither did Ari's, damn him.

Team C found Rio de Janeiro, Santos, Campinas, Ouriphos—the actual

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Ouriphos, or what had been left of it after the earthquake—Bujumbura, Kigali, Dallas, Fort Worth, Waco, Austin, Leningrad, Tallinn, and Helsinki. An impressive score—and for nine of the cities they had been playing in the dark. The floating cameras zoomed in for close-ups of their smiles.

Team D found Tokyo, Jakarta, Bandung, Herat, Ferah, and (at the last minute, thanks to Nikos), Wichita. But we were saved from last place by Team E, who had found only *two* cities, Saskatoon and Kifta, and had misidentified Kifta. They couldn't hide their embarrassment, not even the Team Leader, not even when the cameras targeted him. The glances that went around the dome were almost compensation for our losing the quarter. Team Leader E stared straight ahead, mottled color rising on the back of his neck; unless he made a fast recovery in the next quarter, he'd be fucking his hand for *months*. And the fan reaction and betting back home on his orbital didn't even bear thinking about—let alone the sponsor's reaction. The team ended with only twenty-eight points adjusted.

Team C won the quarter, of course, 480 adjusted. Team Leader instructed me through my 'plant to try to find out their I.D. tactics in the coffee hour.

Larissa always does that to me. As if I were some kind of tactical genius, just because once I'd been quarterback for the team that racked up the record, 996 points in a single quarter. We'd found Pax. But you can't find Pax every quarter—after all this time, the accursed place is still floating around the Pacific—and underneath I'm always afraid some flyer-mate will psych out how bad I really am at team tactical programs.

What had Maria seen on my face?

I didn't find out. I didn't find out Team C's I.D. tactics either, because the coffee hour is only fifty-six minutes by strict rule before the blackout period, and Team B Leader had taken the risk of doping all of his people on Impenetrables set to kick in right after the ref announcements. God, he was self-confident. I looked at him sideways, when I was sure Maria or the cameras weren't watching. He hadn't changed much in the two years since our divorce. Short, muscled, smiling. Ari.

Then the coffee hour was over and the Leaders took the dome field down and Maria and I went back to the flyer and shot each other with the time-release knock-out drugs. The camera hovered close as we laid the strips on each other's necks, and stayed close afterward. There's a hazy period while the stuff takes effect. Players are vulnerable: it's a warm sweet letting go, sometimes of words as well as consciousness. But I was pretty sure I didn't give anything away. Maria finally stopped talking to me and rolled over in her bunk, and I smiled to myself in the darkness.

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Preparation for second quarter.

When I woke, Maria was blinking sleepily. The camera was already on. I felt rested, but of course that was no clue to how much time had elapsed—the drug made me feel rested. Had we been out two hours or twenty? However long it had been, the computer had moved all the flyers for the second round. I knew the latitude and longitude of where we had been, but now we could be literally anywhere in the world. Again.

Adrenaline surged, and my stomach tightened with pleasure.

We strapped ourselves into the kick-off chairs. The portholes were shallow opaque caves. "Tallyho," Maria said. I ignored her. The computer kept us waiting for ten minutes. When the seat straps finally unlocked, Maria tried a direct run for her console (she's strong), but I was ready for her and made a flying tackle. She went down. I scrambled over her, reached my console, and activated it. The first half-hour control of the flyer was mine.

Maria got up slowly. She wasn't hurt, of course, but she made a show of rubbing her shoulder for the camera. She's a high-ranked player on a number of orbitals. Very dramatic.

The portholes de-opaqued. Daylight. More barren plain, more dust blown by unbreathable air, some scraggly plant stuff in dull olive. Not much rock. No coast. No snow or frost, but of course with the greenhouse effect worsening every year that ruled out less than fifteen degrees of latitude. We could still be anywhere. You always hope the random patterns generated by the computer will set you down right at the edge of a qualifiable city, but that has only happened to me once. And it was Moscow, only ninety points unreffed.

I lifted the flyer for an aerial view, taking it up as high as the rules allowed. Maria and I both peered through every single porthole. Nothing but plain. Then I saw it, a quick flash of silver on the right horizon. Water. I headed right.

"Water over there!" I said excitedly, jazzing it up for the camera. It was watching Maria for the reaction shot, of course, but she just looked thoughtful: the serious young player concentrating for the fans back home.

A small river meandered across the dust. Along its banks, plants were a little greener, a little fuller. They disgusted me; pitiful things, trying to actually grow in this place. God knew what chemicals were in the river.

I followed it at top speed, needing to reach a city before my half-hour was up. With speed limited during play to sixty-five miles per hour, every minute counted. I didn't want to arrive at a city just as Maria's console cut in and mine shut down.

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We flew for twenty minutes. Ruins appeared below us, some broken concrete and the mound pattern that means structures under the dust. But visual was enough to tell me that the place was too small to qualify as a city. Some stupid little town, not even enough left of it to get a fix on the architecture and make a guess what continent we were on.

Then the alarm bells went off.

"Lift! For God's sake lift the fucking flyer!" Maria screamed. I thought she was over-reacting for the camera until I saw her face. She was terrified.

Maria was—or rather, somewhere along the line had become—toxiphobic.

The computer had removed the aerial ceiling the second the radiation detectors had registered the toxic dump. I took the flyer up to forty thousand feet. It was the one time the rules allowed a major overview during a quarter, but Maria didn't even glance at a porthole. She stood breathing hard, eyes on the deck, pale as dust. By the time she had control of herself again, we had shot forward and I was dropping back to legal height.

Maria was toxiphobic.

And she hadn't even seen the ruins over the horizon at 342 degrees.

I used the five minutes I had left to take us as far in the other direction as I could. Five minutes would never be enough time to fly there and do an I.D. My best bet was to hope she didn't fly that way during her half-hour.

She didn't. She veered off at twenty-eight degrees, and I kept careful track on my compass of everything she did after that. We came across three more polluter towns, but nothing big enough to qualify for points. When my console came back on, I headed straight back to my ruins, flying with that cocky grin that alerts fans that something is going to happen. Maria watched me sourly, at least when the camera was off her. "Know where we're going, do we?" I didn't answer. I didn't have to.

The city ruins were extensive, with roads leading in from all directions and a downtown section of fallen concrete and steel poking above the blowing dust. There were no clues, however, in the architecture, or at least none that I could identify. Ari had been the architectural whiz.

I started the chatter on the 'plant. "Cazie on. I've found one. Daylight, doesn't seem to be waxing or waning. No architectural clues to describe. Central downtown core, roads leading in from all directions, collapsed overpasses, plain with a 1.62 degree incline, small river flowing outside the city but not through it, no other still-existing visible waterways."

"Team Leader on. What's the diameter?"

"Crossing it now . . . I estimate three miles metropolitan . . . hard to be sure."

"Regular perimeter?"

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"Circling now . . ." The detector shrilled.

I started to take the flyer up and to the right, but after a minute the alarm shut down.

"Cazie on. There's a toxic dump, but it's small—a few seconds moved me out of range."

"Did you see anything significant while you were lifting?"

"No. I'll circle in the other direction, try to get a shape for the perimeter."

By now the fans would be glued to their sets. They, of course, already knew what city we had. The name would be shimmering across their screens. The question now was, how would we players identify it? And who would get the points? I had 14.3 minutes left. Maria stood at her console, jaw clenched so tight her lips flared out slightly, like a flower.

"Cazie on. The shape is pretty regular. No, wait, it flattens out into a sort of corridor of ruins extending out at 260 degrees. There's a *river* here. Another one. A big one, but really muddy, clogged, and sluggish. . . ." Not for the first time, I wished that soil analysis from inside the flyer was legal. Although then where would the challenge be?

"Jack on," he said through the 'plant. "Do the city ruins go right to the edge of the river or was there a park?"

"Cazie on. Seems to be extensive flat area between even the smallest ruins and the river."

"Team leader on. Vestigial vegetation?"

"None. The . . . " The alarm shrilled again.

This time the computer let me take the flyer all the way up. Maria started to tremble, clutching the edge of her console with both hands. Even over the alarms I could hear her: "Near cities. In their water, by their parks, goddamn fucking polluters, toxic dumps all over the place they *deserved* to all die . . ." But I didn't have time to gloat over her loss of control. Over twenty thousand feet the high-altitude equipment kicked in, all per game rules, and I got it all: aerial photos before we broke the cloud cover, sonar dimensions, sun position above the clouds, steel density patterns. Of course we couldn't access the computer banks, but we didn't have to. We had Jack, who had been a first-draft pick for his phenomenal memory. I passed him the figures right off the console, such a sweet clean information pass it almost brought tears to my eyes, and in less than a minute Jack said, "Syracuse, United States, North America!" Team Leader filed it, the computer confirmed, and the news went out over 'plants and cameras. The first score of the quarter. 185 points, plus points for initial continent identification, and no fouls for holding too long in toxic range. Mine.

I took the flyer down and grinned at Maria.

* * *

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Once we knew where we were, the plays became a cinch. Chatter flew heavy over team channels: if you're in waning light and Cazie is in full light at 76 20′ W 43 07′N, where might I be in what seems to be dawn? I pictured fans flipping channels, listening, arguing, the serious betters plotting flyer trails on map screens.

Maria found Rochester, United States. Her time ran out and I got Buffalo, United States and Niagara Falls, Canada, which barely qualified for size and wasn't very many points, given that the falls are still there, torrents of water over eroded rock. Ari once told me that those falls are one of the few places on earth with relatively clean water because water going that fast through rapids cleanses itself every hundred yards. He was probably teasing.

Time was called a few hours after we reached dusk. Maria looked tired and angry, the anger probably because she'd given away so much. She was behind in points, behind in psych-out, undoubtedly down in the betting back home.

I whistled some Mozart.

Maria stared at me coldly. "Did you know they buried him in an open grave for outcasts? With lime over him so the body wouldn't smell? Just threw him in like garbage?"

I shrugged. I couldn't see that it mattered. His music is glorious, but he was probably just as morally guilty as all the rest of them. Polluters do not deserve to live. That's the first thing children are taught: Do not foul the life systems. I had a sudden flash of memory: Myself at four or five, marching around kindergarten, singing the orbital anthem and fingering the red stitching on my uniform: MY BODY, MY ORBITAL.

I said maliciously, "At least limestone isn't toxic." But she didn't even react. She really was depressed.

The screen in the corner suddenly flashed to life: Team Leader A. It startled both of us so much we turned in unison, like mechanical dolls. Only Team Leader A can use the screen to contact everyone during a game, and then only for game called, for an emergency, or for important news from home. He's the only one allowed direct orbital contact. My stomach tightened.

"Team Leader A. News flash. Don't panic, anyone, it's *not* an orbital. Repeat, no orbital is in danger. But something has happened: They've opened warfare on the moon."

Maria and I looked at each other. She was breathing hard. Not that she knew anybody on the moon, of course; it's been two generations since anybody but diplomats have made contact with those maniacs. Generations before that their ancestors chose their way off planet, ours chose ours. To qualify for an orbital, you had to be a certain kind of person: non-violent, non-polluting, no criminal record of any kind, clearly self-

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supporting (you had to have money, of course, but money alone wouldn't do it), intelligent, and *fair*. You had to be able to respect rules.

Nobody else got in, not even relatives of qualifiers. Our founders knew they were choosing the future of the human race.

Everybody else with enough money but not enough decency tried to get to a moon colony.

"As far as orbital diplomats can tell, the war started when one underground moon colony mined another and detonated by remote. We don't yet know how many colonies are involved. But the orbitals agree that there is no danger to us. This war, if it is a war, is confined to themselves."

Team Leader A looked at us a minute longer. I couldn't read his expression. Then the screen went blank.

"Oh, God," Maria said. "All those people."

I looked at her curiously. "What do you care? There's no threat to any orbital."

"I *know* that. But even so, Cazie . . . that's not a game. It's real. Dying trapped underground while everything explodes around you. . . ."

I got out the third set of black-out strips. To tell you the absolute truth, I find attitudes like Maria's tiresome. She can't really care about moonies; how could she? They're no different from the maniacs who ruined Earth in the first place. She was just pretending because it made her look sensitive, cosmopolitan . . . to me it looked flabby. Moonies weren't like us. They didn't understand moral obligations. They didn't follow the rules. If they all blew each other up, it would just make space that much safer for the orbitals.

And her depression was ruining my triumph in the game.

That was when I realized that she must be doing it deliberately. And pretty neat it was. I had almost lost my edge for the game, thinking about moonies trapped underground . . . there's nothing so terrible about being underground anyway. It probably wasn't that much different from the coziness of an orbital. It was wide, open, unprotected spaces that were scary.

Unless you were scoping them from thirty thousand feet, making a high, clean information pass, the first one of the quarter and a total of two hundred points. . . .

I opened her black-out drug, grinning.

In the third quarter the computer set us down in darkness, on sand. Blowing sand as far as the high beams could see at maximum altitude. Miles and miles of blowing sand. Over my 'plant Nikos, our broad-base geography offense, ran me through the most likely deserts. Maria used

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a sweet triple-feint to get to her console first, and she called the first play.

We didn't find *anything* for hours. Team C reported Glasgow just as our sky began to pale in the east, and that gave us an approximate longitude. Jack found Colombo. Team A reported Managua and Baghdad. Then, slowly, mountains began to rise on our horizon. I calculated how far away they must be; they were *huge.*

"Nikos on," he said. "All right, I have to make this quick, Cazie, my play starts in forty-five seconds and we're coming into something. The mountains are part of the Rockies, and you're between them and the Mississippi River in the Great Central Desert of North America. Fly close enough to describe specific mountain profiles with degree separations to Jack and he'll take it from there. Jack, can you take it now?"

"Jack on. Got it. Cazie, go."

I described for three minutes and he suggested where I should look. I did, but not quick enough. Maria got La Junta, United States, North America. I got Pueblo, just barely. Then we hit a toxic dump and an announcement from Team Leader A simultaneously.

"Team Leader A. News flash. Orbital diplomats in three moon colonies have ceased communicating: Faldean, Troika, and Alpha. The assumption is that all three colonies are destroyed and our . . . our diplomats are dead."

His image stared straight ahead. After a minute he added, "I'll let you all know if they call the game."

Call the game.

"They won't do that, will they, do you think?" I said to Maria.

She said, "I don't know."

I found Colorado Springs.

But how many fans were even watching?

They didn't call the game. We finished the day almost dead even. Right after we took the black-out drug, Maria crawled into my bunk. I was surprised—flabbergasted. But it turned out she didn't even want to fuck, just to be held. I held her, wondering what the hell was going on, if she thought I'd fall for some kind of sexual psych-out. The idea was almost insulting; I'd been a pro for nearly eight years. But she just lay there quietly, not talking, and when black-out was over she again seemed focused and tough, ready for the last quarter.

"Tallyho."

I never did learn what that meant. But I wasn't about to ask. I knew Maria had finished most of the two-year Yale software, and I've never even accessed a college program.

We de-opaqued in rocky hills, in daylight. Twenty minutes later we

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found a saltwater coast. After that it was almost too easy: Algiers. Bejaia. Skikda. Bizerte. Tunis. Not even any toxic dumps to speak of.

Too easy. And Maria and I were almost even in pre-reffed points.

"My play!"

"Take it, asshole. You won't reach Kalrouan or Monastir by the time the quarter ends."

"The hell I won't."

Of course I didn't. It was too far. But I reached something else.

The light had begun to fail. I gambled on sticking to the coast rather than flying inland towards Kalrouan. Out of the gathering darkness loomed red cliffs. Piles of rubble clung to their sides, banked on terraces and ledges that had been folded by earthquakes and eroded by wind. From the sides of the cliffs twisted steel beams bristled like matted hair. "Cazie on. There's a city—maybe not a city—just below me. We're twenty-two minutes out of Tunis following the coast. Jack?"

"Jack on. Too small to qualify."

"Team Leader on. Sorry, Cazie. Come on in."

"It doesn't look too small!"

"It's too small."

"Maybe it's in the supplementary d-base." Nobody memorizes the supplementary database; it's all those cities and towns that don't qualify for points. Unless, of course, there's a tie, or a field goal at endgame. . . .

Seventeen minutes left.

"Team Leader on. We don't have any reason to think we're that close to a tie, Cazie. And if you earn a penalty by calling it wrong—"

Nobody can call in advance how the computer will ref points. Base points are of course known, but there are too many variables altering base points. If there's a flash of sunshine that the flyer registers as strong enough to count as a latitude clue, you lose points, even if you didn't notice that the fucking clouds parted. There are penalties assessed against other teams that you don't hear about until the quarter's over. There are points added for plays in darkness, subtracted for nuclear-radiation clues above certain level, multiplied by a fractional constant for the number of cities already found during the quarter, factored for dozens of other things. But against all that, I *knew*. I did. We were close to a tie. You don't play this game for eight years without developing a sixth sense, a feeling. A hunch.

Sixteen minutes.

"Cazie on. I got a hunch. I just do. Let me try for a touchdown."

"Team Leader on. Cazie, last time you . . ."

"Larissa—*please*."

She didn't say anything. Neither did Jack or Nikos. Last time I tried for an endgame touchdown I froze. Just froze, out there alone in the

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howling unbreathable desert with no walls, no life support, unprotected under that naked angry sky. . . . We were disqualified. Disgraced. Odds on us lengthened to the moon, all four of us slept alone for a month. It took three flyers to get me in.

"Please. I have the hunch."

"Team Leader on. Go."

Fifteen minutes.

I slammed my fist onto the console code and struggled into my suit. The camera floated in for close-ups. Maria watched me through narrowed eyes. My 'plant said, *She's going to say it.*

"Cazie, it's only a game. It's not worth risking your life for a game."

I sealed the suit.

"You'll be exposed right at the edge of the ocean. God knows what toxins you'll be exposed to, even through the suit. You know that. We went right over that dump down the coast, and that ocean looks terrible. When your field's off, you'll be completely exposed."

I reached for my helmet. She was talking her fears, not mine.

"*And* you'll be right there in the *open.* God, all that open space around you, desolate, winds blowing—completely *exposed.* Unprotected. The winds could blow you off the—"

I sealed my helmet, shutting out her words.

The airlock took one minute to empty and open. Eleven minutes. The second the door opened, I was out.

The winds hit me so hard I cried out and fell against the flyer. The camera, buffeted by winds, was right behind me. I straightened and started away from the flyer. Almost immediately the fear was there, clawing at me from inside.

Open. Unprotected. Poisoned. Life systems fouled, death in the air and soil and water. . . . Twenty-eight years of conditioning. And the fact that my conscious mind knew it was conditioning didn't help at all. Dead, foul, exposed, dead, dead, unprotected. . . .

I made myself keep walking. Nine minutes.

The city—town, village—had been built down the cliff and, probably, along a coastal strip that was now all underwater. When they had built like that, often "richer" people lived higher up, in sturdier structures. Ahead of me the cliff turned in on itself a little, giving more shelter to whatever structures had been there. I made for the bend, running as fast as I could, the wind at my back, fighting the desire to scream. To fall. To freeze.

Around the curve of rock were twisted steel beams, welded together and extending back inside the rock. I wrenched at them, which was stupid; they were huge, and nothing was going to break off a piece that could be carried into a flyer. There were chunks of concrete all around,

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but concrete doesn't count. Below me, the poisoned ocean howled and thrashed.

I worked my way between the steel beams. Whatever walls had been here had long since fallen down, the rubble blown away or washed away or just disintegrated. Dust blew all over everything; the steel and concrete were pitted by grit. It was the ugliest place I had ever seen. And it could shift under my feet any second. But between the steel beams a kind of cave, still roughly rectangular, led back into the cliff. The polluters had built into the earth before they destroyed it.

Three minutes.

I climbed over fallen rocks and rubble to get deeper into the cave house. For a moment I remembered the underground war on the moon and my breath stopped, but at the same moment I passed some kind of threshold and the sound from the horrible winds diminished abruptly. I kept on going.

Two minutes.

At the very back of the house I found it.

There was a loose fall of rock from the ceiling in the most protected corner; smashed wood stuck out from under it. Some piece of furniture. I tugged at the rocks; when they wouldn't move, I scrabbled with my hands behind them. Oh God don't tear the suit, don't let the ground shift or more rocks fall from the ceiling, don't . . . my fingers closed on something smooth and hard.

And whole.

It was a keyboard, wedged between two rocks, slimy with some kind of mold but in one piece. I wiggled it free and started to run. For the first time in many minutes I became aware of the camera, floating along behind me. Not slowing, I held the keyboard in front of it, screaming words it couldn't hear and I couldn't remember. The winds hit me like a blow, but if I was clear enough of the cave for wind, I was clear enough for transmission.

"Cazie on! Larissa? Fuck it—*Larissa!*"

"Go!"

"I got it! A touchdown! A whole! A touchdown!"

"Touchdown by Team D!" Larissa screamed, on what I assumed to be all channels. "Touchdown!"

Thirty seconds.

The earth moved under me.

I screamed. I was going to die. The game was over but I was going to die, exposed unprotected poisoned dead on the fucking earth. . . .

The quake was small. I wasn't going to die. I swayed, sobbed, and began to fight my way back against the wind. Darkness was falling fast. But I could see the flyer, I was almost there, I had the whole, I was not

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going to freeze, and the treacherous earth was not going to take its revenge on me. On someone, almost certainly, eventually, but not on me.

Touchdown.

We won.

The reffed score among three teams—not just two, but *three*—was close enough to make the endgame play legal. We got 865 points adjusted, and beat the closest team, C, by 53 points. My keyboard gave us Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, North Africa, from the supplementary database—a town no one had scored before.

The party at the base was wild, with fans at home flashing messages on the screen so fast you could barely read them. Drink flowed. I got pounded on the back so often I was sore. I had five whispered bids for the traditional post-game activity, *three* of them from Team Leaders. High on victory, I chose Ari. He had always been the best lover I had, and we even, in drunken pleasure, talked about getting together again back home. It was an astonishing party. Fans will talk about it for years.

Team Leader A says they'll put the keyboard in a museum in one of the orbitals, after the thing is cleaned up and detoxed. I don't care what they do with it. It served its purpose.

The moon war apparently was brief and deadly. No transmissions from any colony. They're assumed all dead. But while I was downing my third victory drink and Larissa and I were laughing it up for the cameras, I got a great idea. All the moon colonies were underground, so it won't take long for the surface marks to disappear: Collapse the energy domes and in a few years meteors will make the surface look pretty much like the rest of the moon. But the colonies will still be there underground, or their ruins will, detectable to sonar or maybe new heatseekers. As long as the heat lasts, anyway. Looking for them will be a tremendous challenge, a new kind of challenge, with new plays and feints and tactics and brand new rules.

I can hardly wait. ●

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Anything can happen when a hobo gang descends upon the circus train. . . .

A HALF-DIME ADVENTURE

By Don Webb

art: Janet Aulisio

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I'd found me a pan with no holes in it. I'd already plucked the chicken. I washed the pan in the creek, scouring it out with sand. I made a little fire and hotted up the pan. I put pieces of the chicken in. Sizzle sizzle. Pour in a little water. I would make a mulligan that the yeggs—a yegg is a professional criminal—and the bindle stiffs would remember till their dying days. They'd cough out pieces of their lungs in cold hobo jungles and say, "That was fine. That was sure some mulligan Tim Wilson cooked us the night before we stole the circus train. That was the best mulligan I had in my life."

"You can smell that chicken for a mile." It was Half Face Joe. A railroad cop pushed him off a speeding train deep in the Yukon. He fell into the rocks doing forty. He left half of his face there. He even has a hole on the ugly ruin of his head which you can stick your finger in and feel his brains. He charges a quarter for this entertainment. I only had the stomach to do it once and it was cold in there. Cold like the Yukon snows. I told Half Face he'd better hope for Heaven because his brains would melt in the other place. He carried a sack of vegetables.

"You buy those things, Half Face?"

"I jes stuck my head in the store and they gimme those things."

We sorted out the rotted from the clean and I cut up the clean. Carrots. Turnips. Celery. Tomatoes. This will be a superior mulligan. Half Face carried the rotten things off. I suspect he ate 'em. He's none too cleanly. The mulligan was boiling a little too hard and I tossed a little dirt on the fire.

Moses Donelly walked up. He kept body and soul together by DDing. Being a Deaf and Dumb man. He'd go to a pharmacy and buy some lavender cologne, then he'd soak several envelopes with it. Then he'd go door to door with a card, "I am Deaf and Dumb from birth. I need money to go to my cousin's funeral in Laramie. Would you buy a packet of lavender from me?" Sometimes he'd run into a real dummy who made with the hands. Moses would sign back. 'Course Moses' signs were pure bunkum. The dummy would know it but everybody would think, "There's two dummies talkin' to one another. Ain't it a miracle? God's in His Heaven and everybody's happy."

Moses parted the grass in front of him and soon was standing by my mulligan. "It'll be dark soon and this jungle will be full. I want to be sure you get this." He pulled out a Dr. White's four-bit mickey. I put it in my shirt pocket.

"Moses Donelly, you are a gentleman."

"I remember when you sprung me from the railroad jail in 'Frisco. If I can ever help you. Let me know. I'm your man."

"You can help me now by filling this coffee can with water and then by setting beside me for a spell."

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Moses was back in a shake of a cow's tail. I poured the water into my mulligan. Poured and stirred. Poured and stirred.

Moses undid his bindle and handed me a can of pepper. I peppered my mulligan just so. There were other fires being lit in the jungle.

"Tim Wilson, you reckon we'll steal that circus?"

"I reckon we'll try. Some of us may get killed but that's the same as any day. Any day you wake up you may get killed. These jungles are full of ghosts."

Just as I said that a cool breeze began to blow through the jungle as though the dead hoboes and yeggs were raising to my call, which is just as well. I'd rather have ten hobo ghosts with me than one live citizen. Maybe some of those ghosts would take the bullets for us tonight. They don't stand nothing to lose, if you think about it.

Parsimonious Pete was brewing coffee. It would be weak coffee brewed from grounds that had already had three chances to swim. Nobody needed money as bad as Parsimonious. If he couldn't talk you out of it, it would just sort of gravitate to him. I once saw him pick up a dime by just touching it with his elbow. He was magnetic for silver. He'd probably talk some greenhorn into buying his coffee tonight. If anybody ever found out where he hid his money, they'd crack his ugly mug. It'd be easier to find out what grows on the dark side of the moon.

Someone got a pot to boil clothes and all the bindle stiffs were gathering around. Moses took my spare outfit down. A fight started about then. One of the brass peddlers, a seller of "gold" jewelry, turned out to be lousy. Dead lice roiled in the laundry pot. I could hear some of the boys cursing Brass Bill. The curses would lead to shoves, shoves to a fight, and a fight to somebody getting killed. That would queer the whole business. All the hoboes would leave the jungle as soon as somebody got killed (even if they just got drunk and fell in the fire). I hoped Preachin' Ivy would show up. This whole caper was his idea and he could settle a crowd the way an egg can settle coffee grounds.

Moses came back with my clothes. "They're raisin' a fight. I didn't want to put these in the pot because someone's sure to turn the pot over."

Sure enough, just as he said those words there was a great whoosh of steam. Somebody pushed Brass Bill down in the mud and embers. He screamed as he was getting scalded, so somebody tapped his head with a brick. I reckoned he was done for because I heard them dividing up his loot—even his 99¢ a dozen brass rings that he dropped for a dollar or more. He shouldn't have come into the jungle lousy.

"You know, Tim Wilson, it's a mean world."

"Compared to what, Moses? Compared to what?"

Night came and about half the camp left on account of Brass Bill. Ivy still hadn't showed. He was supposed to be in town getting rods. If he

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didn't come in an hour or so, we'd head out, figuring the town bulls had jailed him. I poured my mulligan into cups and cans and everybody agreed that it was the best mulligan anybody had had for quite some time. Some of the boys were pulling out their mickeys, but I didn't drink none because I knew Ivy wouldn't hand out any rods to drunk men.

A stool pigeon moon came up. Half Face suggested we bury Brass Bill or at least drag him away from the jungle. We got up a burial party and they drug him off to cover him with leaves.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Preachin' Ivy carried a crate under his right arm. He walked up to the fire and helped himself to my mulligan. "Ain't nobody here."

"Brass Bill got himself killed and everybody lit out."

"How many are left?"

"Ten counting you and me."

Ivy thought a while. "We can still have a damn good time with ten men. We'll just take the last eight cars."

He opened his case. He gave a gun to Moses and me, one to Parsimonious Pete and Half Face, and kept one for himself.

"I bought these from Judge Cooley so ditch 'em if you get caught. Judge Cooley told me he'd hang anybody who showed up with his guns."

The burial party made its way back, singing a low, mournful tune. As soon as they saw Ivy, they shut up. Ivy's thinking all the time—there's a fire inside his brain, and sometimes you can see that fire through his pupils. Stops a man to see that fire 'cause he always realizes he's in the presence of a man who is a little quicker than he is.

"The train will be along in two hours. Formeter's Circus will be in the last sixteen cars. We'll take the last eight. When the train starts up the big grade it'll slow down to two, three miles per hour. Parsimonious and Half Face will take the eighth car and unhook it. The cars will start rolling backwards. Everybody else will be on their cars by then. Our mulligan-maker and Moses will take the caboose. The railroad bull will be there with the circus strongman. Take 'em out. I'll take the fourth car. The money box. I'll cut up the payroll ten ways. The cars will roll for twenty miles. We'll get the circus to put on a little show for us—then we'll let the cats loose as a little gift for John Law—then we'll ride off in ten separate directions on the horses the circus has so kindly provided for us. By the time they've sent a train to pick up the uncoupled cars we'll be forty miles away. Boys, we'll go down in history."

There was some questions and some answers. Everybody speculated on what we might find. One man had seen a hootchy-kootchy dancer in a circus at St. Louis. He picked up a rag and danced round the fire to show us what kind of gyrations to expect. Another had seen a talking dog.

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Stumps Magee asked that if we came across a talking dog we should give it to him, as a talking dog would be a great aid in his begging. We took a vote. A talking dog for Stumps.

A third man had had his fortune told. A gypsy woman had dealt the cards. You will travel the country whole and not die until very old.

Parsimonious Pete said, "You mean they'll be gypsies on this train? I don't like it. Gypsies can hex you bad."

"Oh I've got something stronger than gypsy curses," said the man who just told the story of his fortune, and he pulled from his vest pocket a wooden pig about two inches in length. "I've got this pig and when I'm getting shot at I say, 'Little pig, little pig don't let me get shot at 'cause if they get me who's gonna take care of you?' or if I'm in court I say, 'Little pig, little pig don't let me go to jail 'cause if I go to jail you'll go to jail too.' "

"Where'd you get the little pig?" Ivy asked.

"I found him in the hands of a dead hobo. He was the oldest 'bo I ever saw so I figure he's got to be lucky."

The man polished the pig and returned it to his pocket. I could see the fire in Ivy's eyes. He was thinking about that little pig.

Half Face Joe doused the fire. It was time to take our positions. As we walked to Dead Man's Hill, I thought I saw Half Face open his four-bit mickey and tip it into the hole in his head. I swore that if I got out of this caper, I would stay among men that were fully alive.

We crouched behind bushes and trees. They were running two engines on the train, which was one too short for the grade. Most of the train was still on the valley floor when the engines labored past. Sixty cars would have to pass before the circus would begin to pass. Moses was coughing heavy in the coal smoke.

He was still coughing when our time came. The train was going maybe four miles an hour—still strong enough to knock your wind out if you catch wrong. We all sprang out. Moses came from one side and I from the other. I knew they could hear him coughing so I pushed him ahead of me into the caboose. The railroad bull was up and firing. He sent two slugs into Moses and Moses wounded him in the shoulder. The strongman tried to squeeze himself between a side bench and the ceiling. Half Face and Parsimonious had uncoupled the car because suddenly we began rolling backwards. Moses and the bull went down. I put a bullet in the bull's neck and then I plugged the strongman in the chest—just above a leopard spot. I never saw a man so surprised to die. He stepped off the bench and raised his arms as though to yawn and then he fell on the card table, busting it to flinders.

I checked out Moses. He was dead. I heard a shot from up the train.

We were gaining momentum. Moon-silvered trees blurred by. I went

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through Moses' pockets. Two five-dollar gold pieces and some silver. The strongman didn't have anything but a bar of some soft metal doctored up to look like steel. It was easy to twist around. I pocketed it—figured I could win a few bets. The guard had three paper dollars and a brass token for a drink at Sally O'Mara's in Denver.

I tossed the bodies of the guard and the strongman off the train. Then I realized that I'd tossed out the guard's gun as well. Your own dumbness always trips you up. We were in the valley now, all scrub oak and tall grass. The train rolled on at about twenty per and we were beginning to slow. I laid Moses out on a bench. His eyes jerked open and I thought he might be alive, so I talked with him a spell.

"Sorry that cough killed you. A cough's a terrible thing. My mother died of a cough. She kept coughin' and coughin' and my dad got her some capsules. Four grains quinine and one sixth a grain morphine. To be taken at bedtime. These didn't do a damn bit of good. She kept us up all night. Cough, cough, cough. Me just thirteen and going to read my Caesar everyday. *Omnia Gallia est divisa in partes tres.* And Dad a-laboring in his pharmacy. We just couldn't take it. The sleeplessness. Know what I mean?"

Moses nodded, or maybe the train just jiggled his corpse. I started to break off the legs of the card table. I'd get some linen from the back of the 'boose and soak it with coal oil. We'd need torches when we stopped.

"Poppa and I wore pretty thin. Everybody said that whole Wilson family weren't nothing but a pack of ghosts—no offense Moses—so Poppa compounded a new remedy. *Five* and one sixth grains of morphine. No quinine. Stopped Mother's cough right away. Same way sixty grain of lead stopped yours. If you see Mother, tell her that I love her."

The train was down to two–three miles an hour. Parsimonious applied the hand brakes on the first car. Its wheels shot sparks into the frosty grass. Then the second threw his brakes, then the third, and so on up to me. The train shuddered to a stop. The air smelled of hot iron. An elephant trumpeted. I began lighting my torches.

Preachin' Ivy jumped off and shot his revolver in the air.

"I don't want nobody moving excepting my men. If anybody sticks his head out of a car, I'll blow it all the way to Dead Man's Hill."

I jumped off the caboose carrying all four torches blazing together. I handed one to the wooden pig man, who stood between the second and third cars, one to Ivy, one to the hootchy-kootch man, and one to Half Face.

"Moses didn't make it to the promised land."

"Well, there's a little more for us. We'll have a moment of silence for Moses."

The elephant ruined the moment of silence by trumpeting again.

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"Open up that damn car. Let's see that elephant. Maybe we can cut its tusks off for ivory."

The wooden pig man opened the ride door of the tall boxcar. Loose straw drifted out along with the smell of a hundred barnyards. Someone had already tusked the elephant. The elephant couldn't stand up all the way and sort of crawled forward. His big yellow eyes looked scared. He was looking for someone. He lurched out of the boxcar with a half-liquid motion. The pig man wasn't quick enough. The elephant's front foot smashed the pig man into the frozen ground. This really scared the elephant. He trotted a few yards away from the boxcar. Ivy shot the elephant's rear. He bellowed and went crashing off into the scrub oak.

"Damn murderin' elephant."

The pig man was a breathing bloody mess. There would be no getting up for him—no way to separate the flesh and the earth. Ivy walked over to him. The pig man nodded and Ivy let him have it through the heart. Then Ivy bent down and pulled the wooden pig from the dead man's vest and put it in his own shirt pocket. The elephant bellowed again.

"Can't ever have too much luck," Ivy said. "Let's open the other cars one by one and see what we've got."

"Let's divide the coin first," said Parsimonious Pete.

"Eight ways comes to seventy-five dollars apiece." Ivy started laying the gold and paper in neat piles. Counting out loud where everybody could see. Then we went forward one by one and claimed our share.

The first two cars held the horses. Half Face opened 'em up and peeked inside. Tack was there but the saddles must've been in the main train.

One of the bindle stiffs opened the third car. Eight chimpanzees came stirring out. Parsimonious started shooting, but Ivy yelled at him to stop. Couldn't he see that they were doing no harm? The chimps made a four-three-one pyramid. Then they leapt off and tumbled and scrambled over the cars. One of them stole Parsimonious Pete's cap and was shot for his trouble. At the sound of renewed gunfire all the chimps jumped off the train and into the bushes. They vanished almost instantly, but we heard their chatter as long as we were there.

Half Face went into the chimp car. There were eight little desks with eight little typewriters. Each of the chimps was turning out a five-cent novel. *Frank Reade and his Steam Man of the Plains, Frank Reade and his Steam Horse, Frank Reade and his Steam Team, Frank Reade Jr. and his Steam Wonder, Frank Reade Jr. and his Electric Boat, Frank Reade Jr. and his Wonderful Airship, Frank Reade Jr. and his Electric Velocipede.* In stacks of crates along one side was the whole of the Half-Dime Library. Nowhere was indication that the hard-working apes had received a penny for their labor. In fact, it wasn't clear to us whether the chimpanzees were the authors of these works or were merely typing

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them up from memory as a sort of entertainment. Parsimonious felt badly about shooting one, as all yeggs and hoboes have a soft spot for literary men. Ivy told him not to take it so hard. It was a well-known fact that Mr. Edison was working on a device to produce half-dime novels automatically. Ivy had been to Menlo Park, and had not only told us of the coming light bulb, but had stolen one to show us. If he could have only stolen a method of electrifying it, it would have been quite the novelty.

Parsimonious left the monkey car. He was outside, bawling his head off and looking for coin in the pig man's pockets.

The next car had held the lucre. Now the only thing of interest was a dead bearded lady and her pearl-handled six-shooter. The hootchy-kootch man asked Ivy if he could have the gun and Ivy said sure, why not? One of the other men said it must've been hard to shoot a woman, and Ivy looked at him. *I* wouldn't've wanted to be on the receiving end of that look. It was a special Ivy look, and there was death in it. Ivy said, "If it's got a beard it ain't a woman."

I said, "Ivy, we've made real history. Even the James brothers never stole the *train.*"

Ivy smiled and we all breathed easier. The moon was going down. Bloating near the horizon.

The next car had held the elephant. We collected Parsimonious, all covered in blood and tears. Half Face opened the sixth car. It held a tank and three cages. We each walked through the length of the car—passing the torches backwards so each man got a good look. It was early morning now and much colder, so our breath and the breath of the animals steamed considerably. After this caper we would each ride off in different directions, but I knew in a few weeks we'd all be heading south.

In the tank: A half-man/half-fish swam in stagnant green water. It looked as though someone had hollowed out a thirty-pound albino catfish and stuffed a baby in it. The arms and legs were well-formed—just like a baby's—except covered in scales, each about the size of a dime. The head was large but fishlike. Its silver eyes were scaled over. I think it was blind, but it sensed our passage with its whiskers. Its little mouth worked. O. O. O.

In the first cage to the left: A two-headed black rooster beat its wings at us. It looked just like the chicken that I'd cut up for my mulligan (save for its having two heads). The left head had been fighting the right head. It had pecked out the closer of the right head's eyes. I think we all had to fight to keep our mulligan down—except for Half Face. He was the last one through. He couldn't stand to see this creature with two faces, when he had only one half of one. He opened the cage and grabbed the rooster. He wrung both its necks in contrary directions, then he threw the bird out in the cold. It ran around in the frost with both heads trailing.

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In the cage to the right: A rose bush bloomed. Each blossom was perfect and lime-green. The hootchy-kootch man reached into the cage to pluck a rose for his lapel. Two branches swished forward raking his hand with thorns. He gave a squawk and pulled his hand back. The branches resumed their normal position. Blood dripped down into the terra cotta pot which housed the rose—enriching its soil.

In the second cage on the left: Only musky straw—a sexy-musky smell. Each man shuddered as they wondered what had been here—what kind of ghost the cage held. We were glad for the cold outside air.

We all regrouped outside. There was one unexplored car. We heard a train whistle from far away. That would be the train backing down Dead Man's Hill looking for its lost cars. More-n-likely it also meant John Law. "Time to mount up, boys," said Ivy.

"Not me, boss," I said. "I'm going to see what's in that last car."

The train whistled again and the elephant trumpeted as though calling to its mate.

"Give me your gun then. I told Judge Cooley that I wouldn't let any of his guns fall into lawman's hands."

I hated to be without the gun, but I knew Ivy would take it if I didn't give it to him. "Here."

"It's your own funeral, Tim Wilson."

The boys were mounting up—heading off in the direction Ivy pointed. I opened the last car. There was a long glass case in the middle of the car. In the case, still as death, lay a young red-haired woman. If it was a mannequin, it was the most perfect mannequin I'd ever seen. She was dressed as a bride. She held a bridal bouquet of silk flowers—roses and daisies. A small plaque on the side of the case read, "The Amazing Sleeping Beauty. Miss Daisy Miller fell into a hypnotic trance in 1893 while watching a traveling mesmerist's act. Her parents have taken her to the most expensive doctors in Europe and America to no avail. What does this sleeping girl dream of? What sustains her in her five-year sleep? Will she ever awaken?"

I opened the case. I felt her cheek; to my surprise it was warm. I bent over and listened. I couldn't hear any breathing. I had to get all the details. I could live off this story the rest of my life.

I took a long pull on my four-bit mickey to sweeten my mouth.

I kissed her. Full on the mouth.

Hell, what would *you* do?

She smiled a little, but she didn't awaken. I heard the train whistle—much closer this time. I left Miss Daisy Miller and ran to the horse cars. The horses were all gone, but there was a zebra gelding left. I put a bit in its mouth.

We rode east toward the rising sun. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

Our November issue is something special, our first-ever Double-Length issue, something that we'll be doing twice a year from now on. This huge issue is crammed with as many authors and stories and features as we could possibly shoehorn into it—giving you far more wordage than most novels (the Robinson novella alone is nearly book-length) and a far-greater range of material and different kinds of writing, for considerably *less* than the price of most paperback books on the shelf today. So how can you go wrong? Especially as we have assembled some of the best writers in the business for this special Double Issue, both established Names and rising young stars. Our November cover story, for instance, the powerful novella "Trembling Earth," is a taut and edge-of-your-seat suspenseful story of a Close Encounter with a savage pack of killer dinosaurs in modern-day Florida, by rising new star **Allen Steele,** one of the best new hard science writers around, an author who has been compared to Golden Age Heinlein. And Nebula- and World Fantasy Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson,** one of the most respected and critically acclaimed writers to enter science ficiton in decades, is also on hand for November, taking us to a mysterious distant world peopled with cruel and marvelous and bizarre creatures, for an evocative quest through a landscape of strange dangers and stranger beauties, in a huge nearly book-length novella called "A Short, Sharp Shock."

And is that all? Not even *close* to it. **Also In November:** hot new writer **Janet Kagan** returns with "Getting the Bugs Out," another of her popular Mama Jason stories, the first of which, "The Loch Moose Monster," won our Reader's Poll by a landslide this year; **Alexander Jablokov** spins an intricate web of alien-human relationships in the chilling story of "The Place of No Shadows"; **Terry Bisson,** author of the acclaimed novel *Talking Man,* examines the unexpectedly potent blandishments of small-town life, in the wry and fanciful tale of "The Two Janets"; **Richard Paul Russo,** recent winner of the Philip K. Dick Award, returns with a hard-edged look at the dangers—and the possible rewards—of tinkering with unknown technology, in "Liz and Diego"; **Isaac Asimov** returns with the latest George and Azazel story, this one a sprightly tribute to "The Time Traveler"; **Robert Reed** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a compelling look at some *very* unusual Blue Collar workers, in "The Utility Man"; **Melanie Tem** returns with the unsettling and extremely hard-hitting story of a woman trying to come to terms with an insupportable loss, in the offbeat dark fantasy "Reunion"; **Andrew Weiner** returns after a long absence to take us on tour with a rather mysterious group, in "Eternity, Baby"; new writer **John Griesemer** makes a powerful *IAsfm* debut with an eerie, passionate, and downright *scary* little shocker called "Box of Light"; and Hugo- and World Fantasy Award-winner **Avram Davidson** returns with another delightful and erudite essay, one of a long series of "Adventures in Unhistory" that he's been writing, examining curious and little-known areas of history and folklore—this one takes an entertaining and informative look at "The Moon." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our immense, jam-packed November issue on sale on your newsstands on September 18, 1990.

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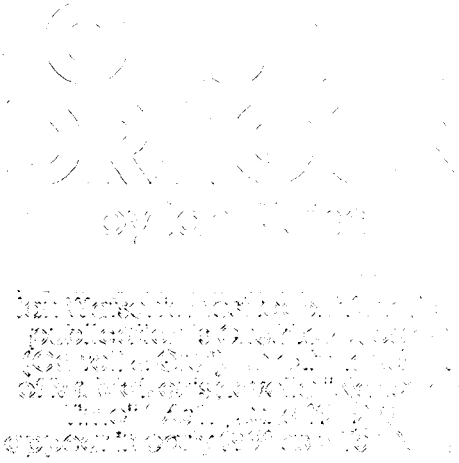

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When Johnny Butler and his sister Martha arrived in Barcelona, buses were decked with Catalan flags, office blocks were draped with banners. Thin red and yellow stripes hung everywhere. Women of all ages clutched single red roses and stems of green wheat. Police wearing riot gear sat like black robots in armored vehicles, watching the Sunday crowds.

"What a shame the sun isn't out!" exclaimed their escort, Salvador Miravell, a tubby whiskery fellow in his thirties. "Those Spanish cops would roast. They would bake." Salvador cast a malevolent glance towards the chill, leaden sky of late April. Climatic change was playing games with the planet. "There'll be deaths tonight," he assured Johnny and Martha. "Still, we'll be independent soon."

Angelica Bonaventura, Salvador's girlfriend who was doing the driving, laughed and wagged a finger. "Just as soon as we finish building Sagrada Familia."

"But we *have* completed Gaudí's temple! Right *now*, thanks to software and holography! Haven't we, Johnny? We just need to iron out our little bug; then all is perfect. How else could we have ever finished such a crazy place?"

"It isn't genuinely finished," insisted Angelica. She was tiny and ebullient, boasting a mass of blonde hair which was perhaps bleached. Forever laughing, smiling. She liked to tease.

"And never *could* be finished!" vowed Salvador.

Angelica glanced back at Martha, grinning. "We make a pretence. A fashard." Martha realized that Angelica was lisping the word "façade." She was making a joke about FaCADes, Inc., which had dispatched brother Johnny from California to troubleshoot the little bug in question.

Taxis buzzed the smart Citroen, black and yellow wasps. Avenues stretched to forever, broad noble dead-straight canyons lined with what Martha took to be plane trees. Lopped, still leafless, those were leprous assemblages of dinosaur bones. Parked cars crowded every free space. The Citroen crossed a square; palm trees arose fifty feet high and more. Roses and Catalan flags, everywhere.

"Scotland might soon be independent within the Euro community," said Salvador. "Likewise Bavaria. Catalonia also; you'll see. Gaudí's ghost will rest easy."

"Inside a ghost building?" Angelica smiled brightly. "Salvador means that Gaudí is a symbol of Catalonialism. We like to argue in English, Señorita Butler—Martha. Do you know that there's no imperative in the Catalan language? In the army, an officer must *ask* his soldiers to stand to attention."

"Do you have your own army?" asked Martha.

"Oh, there won't be any second Civil War. Spaniards will control the situation, as ever."

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"The Spanish bombarded our city from the hills during the Franco war," Salvador said offhandedly. "Some shells fell inside Sagrada Familia."

Old wounds, old grievances, thought Martha; ghosts of the past. To shed their jet lag before catching the Barcelona shuttle, she and her brother had stopped over in Madrid for a couple of days; and Johnny had spoken about the political side to Gaudí's architecture. Gaudí was the luminary of the Catalan Renaissance which had bloomed in the nineteenth century: artistic, political, religious too.

Politics wasn't Johnny's strong suit, but he had spent ten days in this city last year setting up the Sagrada Familia project. Even he had gathered that completing the great church (albeit in phantom, holographic form) was a political act, an act that crowned the sense of national identity, completed it. In Johnny's opinion, the citizens of Barcelona should have been worrying more about the sea level than about nationalism.

Angelica detoured to show off the tree-clad Ramblas, the long street-market of flowers, birds, and books. Crowds, red roses, banners. Placards: communist and socialist, anarchist and linguistic-nationalist. Martha spotted her first whore, a tough hatchet-faced woman in black biding her time by the curb.

"A *rambla*," Angelica told her, "means a gutter, for draining water down from the hills. You were never here before?"

"No, I've never been abroad. Except Mexico, once. Johnny thought I might like a holiday; the software problem can't be too serious. And I wanted to see how Gaudí uses ceramics."

"You're Johnny's twin, of course?"

Of course. Tall, red-headed, freckled twins; just a little gawky. When they walked somewhere together, unconsciously falling into perfect—if angular—step, they were like the advance guard of some clan of clones. Martha didn't like going round with Johnny too much. He was wearing chino trousers, a cord jacket, and cream leather shoes, so she had opted for blue jeans, sneakers, and a dark purple sweater.

From a holog Johnny had brought back, she recognized the column ahead, atop which the bronze statue of Christopher Columbus pointed out to sea. Angelica slowed to a crawl. High tide! The risen Mediterranean flooded over the esplanade, lapping the very base of the column. Columbus' gesture seemed not one of expansion but of exasperation, to ward off the waters. Down at the harbor end, this particular *rambla* was trying to run in reverse, channeling the sea towards the hills. Perhaps the world-wide rise in sea level had already stabilized, and this city needn't fret. Perhaps. Martha made a joke about gondolas.

"Ah," said Salvador, "but imagine the parking problems!".

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"At least the sea food is closer to us these days." Angelica steered in the direction of the promised restaurant, which proved to be miles away. After reaching their goal, she had to cruise for fifteen minutes more to find anywhere to stick the Citroen. Martha's stomach was grumbling. Johnny had warned her that Catalans ate late, though lavishly. Half-past-three for lunch, ten or eleven at night for dinner.

Over a shallow black soupy cauldron of baby octopus; and giant prawns, mussels, and crayfish, all in their shells, Johnny and Salvador discussed the real problem while Angelica chatted with Martha.

Neither Salvador nor Angelica were in the least religious. Elektronika, Salvador's company, simply set up and maintained the holographic projectors at—take a deep breath—the Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family, owned and run by the Spiritual Association of the Devotees of Saint Joseph.

Gaudí had been a true visionary, whose buildings were enchanted wonderlands. Angelica surmised he was also probably crazy. In 1883, at the age of thirty-one, he was commissioned to build Sagrada Familia. By 1910, the bachelor-for-life moved on site. Abandoning all other commissions, he lived as a recluse in his workshop, growing ever more pious, ever more wrapped up in the elaborate symbolisms of his building, which was slowly, slowly rising. When Gaudí was seventy-five in 1926, he was killed by a trolley car while on his way to vespers. Buried in the crypt beneath his largely unfinished creation, Gaudí took the exact details of his plans to the grave with him. Eight belfries soared skyward. Still absent: the central spires which would have dwarfed even those.

Ever since, work had proceeded by fits and starts, accompanied by fierce disputes about what the final design should actually be. Would the church ever be finished? In time, say, for the Barcelona Olympics of '92? No way. In time for the next millennium? Not very likely.

Enter FaCADes, Inc., and brother Johnny.

When Johnny and Martha were kids, he wanted to be an architect, while she wanted to be a potter; she had accomplished her ambition, he had not. Electronics sidetracked Johnny. Or maybe he knew that he possessed no truly original vision, the way a Gaudí had; and the way Martha felt she had with pots and plates and pitchers, pardon the immodesty. Johnny went into CAD, computer assisted design; and the upshot was his Big Idea. Alas, his insight into money matters matched his lack of political savvy. Skipping over GMO (Great Missed Opportunities), the result was a company which he hardly held any equity in, specializing in the "wrapping" of people's homes and business premises in simulations of historic buildings. The Kinkakuji temple, Anne Hathaway's Cottage, Notre Dame (scaled to size, and perhaps deformed in shape to fit the

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site). A craze began. Buyers could change their façade as they pleased. Façades might be the shape of the future, if real wealth dried up: utilitarian boxes enveloped in holographic magnificence, beauty, charm.

Architects would have hated Johnny if he had been more prominent, say the president of FaCADes instead of an employee.

Then came the prestige call from the Spiritual Association of the Devotees of Saint Joseph to complete Gaudí's masterpiece holographically. Those mighty spires must tower over Barcelona *immediately*. FaCADes rejoiced. Johnny set to work.

Several interpretations existed of the finished building. Any of these could be projected; *all* could be, in turn. At last the bickering could cease. Aficionados would be able to assess the impact of several possible solutions on a real-life scale. Mondays, the projectors could conjure up Cunchillos' version. Tuesdays, a subtly different rendering. Why, the central spires could be made even taller than Gaudí ever intended! Sagrada Familia could become a skyscraper of a church! Yet that might spoil the proportions, making the whole ensemble resemble a giant fanciful rocketship designed to reach the nearest star, with the authentic belfries reduced to the status of mere strap-on fuel tanks.

Perhaps the appearance in phantom form of the full church would hasten its actual fulfillment in stone, the filling in of the semblance with substance. Whether so or not, the great work would be complete, at least psychologically.

For the best part of a year, tourists had flocked to Barcelona to stare at the reality, and at the image—the images—that transcended it. Yet now seemingly something was roaming loose *inside* the holographic spires, a free-ranging image which wasn't part of anyone's design.

Salvador shrugged. "It's certainly something. We thought it might be a flicker effect in the holog. Even ball lightning, attracted by the aerial display, the laser activity. But when we switch the holog off, the ghost doesn't linger."

"Most likely it's false data in the control program," said Johnny. "A redundancy. A bug. How reliable is the power supply?"

"That's fine. The holog holds utterly steady. Looks solid as rock. Internal details likewise, as if you could actually climb inside those spires. All that climbs is the ghost. Okay, I shall call it a ghost! To me, it's more like a wayward cursor on a computer screen, but one of the Devotees speaks of a ghost up there."

"Does he think it's the architect's ghost?" Johnny asked whimsically. "Summoned by the completion? Rejoicing? Discontented? The Devotees aren't thinking of terminating the project, are they?"

"Nothing so drastic. Even looking from high up one of the real belfries it's hard to make out what's there. You glimpse it behind one of the air

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vents. Then it's behind another. It's in the main spire, it's in a side tower. The shape? Not a man's, I don't think. You can't notice it from ground level, so there's no flapdoodle in the media, not a word. The Devotees have shut the real belfries temporarily to tourists."

"Lots of disappointed Japanese!" said Angelica. "Japanese love Gaudí."

"Isn't that suspicious?" asked Johnny.

She grinned. "That Japanese love Gaudí?"

"No, shutting the belfries."

Salvador shook his head. "You know how the real belfries interconnect by means of little bridges. Two of the hologs have those same belfries bridging to the towers and spires as well. Can't have our tourists stepping out onto nothingness, can we? So the belfries are closed pending the installation of safety barriers, the work to be carried out . . . *mañana*. Needless to say, the Devotees already had safety barriers in place. We simply removed those. No one noticed. Most natives of Barcelona climb up the belfries once in a lifetime, if ever." Salvador glanced at his watch. "I'm taking you to meet with the Devotees at seven—"

"Just to say 'Holo!' " quipped Angelica. "I'll drive you both to your hotel first. Check in, and shower? Do you wish to come along and see Sagrada Familia too this evening, Martha?"

Martha contemplated a last juicy mussel afloat in the giant pot of *zarazuela*. She felt bloated, OD'd on the fruits of the sea, as if she had consumed most of the aquatic population of the Mediterranean.

"I'm a bit bushed," she admitted. "I think I'd like to work myself up gradually to the church."

"Fine." Angelica lit a filter cigarette. "Tomorrow I'll show you round Gaudí's city. We'll walk or we'll use taxis. The parking, you know!"

Martha inhaled the rich odor of dark tobacco drifting into her face. "Powerful incense," she remarked.

"No, these are low in nicotine and tar. They just taste good."

Oh well, thought Martha, she was in a smoking country now.

When they left the restaurant, Salvador bought Martha a red rose and stalk of wheat from a wandering vendor. Later, in her room in the Cristina Gran Hotel, glowing from a bath, she heard the chatter of a helicopter. From the window she watched the chopper slide overhead, playing a searchlight down upon the streets. Presently she thought she heard in the distance the crackle of gunfire.

"So the Devotees took you out to *dinner*?" Martha asked over coffee and rolls in the hotel restaurant. "What time was that?" She felt she had missed half a day somewhere.

"Mm, 'bout eleven."

"I went to bed early." She remembered: "I heard shooting."

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"Didn't see any trouble myself. Don't worry, Sis, national day's over. Passions will have cooled. This Devotee, Montserrat . . . he was fretting about how our holog of Sagrada Familia may be cheating God. Being a short-cut to the expiation of sins." Johnny gulped some black coffee. He always gulped coffee, usually when it was already cold. "On the other hand, oodles of churches nowadays favor plastic cases full of electronic candles. Drop your pesetas in the slot, a bulb lights up. Even flickers convincingly, and no smoke to stain the décor. Same principle with Sagrada Familia, I'd say. Our blip can hardly be a sign of God's displeasure . . . unless God can't cut the mustard any more, compared with the days of Sodom and Gomorrah!

"I guess," he went on, "Dr. Rubio's the mystic among the Devotees. He says Gaudí was searching for a higher geometry that underlies the universe and signifies the sacred. We've sure increased the geometrical complexity of Sagrada Familia. Could something sacred be leaking through, attracted by the architectural equation we've written in light in mid-air? Could a miracle be impending? A vision of the virgin? Oh, here's Angelica."

Salvador's girlfriend bustled effervescently into the restaurant, smiling, waving.

Catalan flags had vanished from the buses. Some red and yellow posters lay as litter. Business as ever; traffic poured through the wide, deep streets.

A taxi ride along the Diagonal took them to the Güell Pavilions. The financier Güell had been Gaudí's greatest patron. The blue and green mosaics of the rooftop ventilators and dome inspired Martha with ideas of pots made of checkerboards of tile. If only the sun were shining, reflecting luminously from the glazed ceramics. However, the dragon gate made her stand still for minutes on end. A fierce prehistoric flying reptile, fossilized not to stone but to metal, splayed across the gate. Indeed, it *was* the gate: wing bones, great coils of vertebrae, giant scaly clutching claws, the gaping toothed mouth, the blade tongue curving out like a twisted yucca leaf . . .

"Wow," she said after a while.

"Do you like it?" asked Angelica. "Gaudí used dragons a lot when he was young. Kind of pagan, don't you think? Perhaps he got the theme from the peasants. Fossil of some old cult." So she also saw the dragon as a fossil, a fossil that was somehow still . . . alive.

"Are there any similar dragons on Sagrada Familia?"

"There's just one, amongst all the other sculptures. A type of dragon-demon is presenting a bomb to an anarchist. As Gaudí grew pious, so

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the dragon became, what's the word, submerged. Come, I'll show you it submerging—"

A taxi returned them to the heart of town, depositing them outside the Batlló house. Gaping stone jaw bones framed the lower bay windows. Balconies of the upper windows were lunatic dentures for a small whale that sucked and filtered its food. Along the rooftop sprawled a dragon's knobbly backbone; tiles were scales. Far from submerging, it seemed to Martha that the dragon was emerging from the very fabric of the house, roosting on it, about to take flight over the city.

As they walked away up the wide Passeig de Gràcia through a stream of people, Angelica cocked her head. "Can you hear the difference between Spanish and Catalan yet?"

Like the *zarazuela* they had feasted on the day before, it was all one big soup of language to Martha. Was this prawn Catalan, was that octopus Spanish?

A few hundred yards further on, the apartment block called La Pedrera wrapped an undulating cliff with windowed caves around a whole street corner. The serpentine rippling of stone suggested that a giant snake had seized the building in tier upon tier of coils.

"This may be the masterpiece," Angelica said.

"Must cost a fortune to live in."

"Oh no, these flats weren't popular. No way to hang out bedding to air or dry your washing. Balconies are the wrong shape, see? The crazy wrought iron would tear linen to ribbons. So the rents are cheap. A big bank bought this place to turn into a cultural center. They can't get the tenants out. They have been trying for years now."

"So is La Pedrera popular or isn't it?"

"Low rents are always popular. We can go up to the roof. That's open to the public."

Monster figures guarded the rooftop, where a maze of steps circuited round two plunging courtyard pits. Alien stone robots, some with ceramic saurian skins, others helmeted like knights: such were the chimneys, the ventilators. Did those move about at night? Did they stomp ponderously around the flights of steps, playing an eerie slow game of chess in which the rules of geometry had altered?

"Look!"

Far over the other rooftops, Martha saw for the first time the closely grouped slim belfries of Sagrada Familia. Honeycombed with air vents and tipped with bobbly stone flowers, those tall rough-textured spindles appeared to have *grown*, organ pipe cactus style, rather than to have been built. Johnny was out there now, checking the programming.

At that moment, apparition-like, the greater church switched on.

A cluster of higher towers now dwarfed the belfries. Some were slender,

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two were of ampler girth. Martha christened the two main spires Big Boy . . . and Biggest Boy. If the sun had shone, might there have been a hint of unreality? Looming against a grey sky, the phantom church appeared utterly solid and tangible. And utterly strange. She visualized that whole great assembly rising into the clouds on tongues of Pentecostal fire, seeking heaven . . . "Organ pipes," she murmured.

"Yes, it's designed as a musical instrument, too." Angelica explained how the belfries would act as resonance boxes for tubular bells. Air vents were stone sound boards. Huge organs should have played counterpoint to the carillon. The voices of bells and the deep drone of organs should have resounded throughout Barcelona, making the whole city ring with sacred melody; such had been Gaudí's hope.

Back down on the Passeig de Gràcia, Angelica led Martha to a café to tempt her with hot chocolate and croissants.

"So why did you become a potter?" Angelica asked as she dunked her pastry into her cup. Martha followed suit; sweetness overwhelmed her taste buds.

Laying her croissant in her cup, Martha kneaded her strong hands by way of demonstration. "I can't put it into words. It's physical. The inner eye, the fingers . . . I know a blind Zen potter—called Ray. Ray empties himself of sight, sight that he never ever possessed. His fingers achieve . . . enlightenment."

"Is Ray your boyfriend?"

"Partner . . ." His touch enlightens me, thought Martha. His fingers know me more surely than eyes that look at me and see only: the female Johnny.

Reading her expression, Angelica nodded. She dipped and sucked, licked her lips. "My body has a will of its own. It lives its own secret life. After Salvador and I make love, I often sleepwalk. I cry out, I laugh, I sing. He has to watch that I do not tumble from our balcony."

"Johnny's buildings are such abstract conceptions," Martha said. "Switch 'em on, switch 'em off. Sagrada Familia looks solid enough while it's switched on."

As the chocolate cooled it became glutinous. Soon the butt end of Martha's croissant was locked in position in her cup.

Angelica lit a cigarette. "I'll show you round the Gothic quarter. We can grab some *tapas* for lunch. A light lunch. This and that. Do you fancy hotly spiced octopus? Then, after, we'll go to the Güell Park."

Martha thought about schooldays. Before she insisted on attending a different school from Johnny, their apparent sameness—at first such a source of conspiratorial joy—had become embarrassing, a cause of social, even sexual confusion. When dating began, girls had accosted Martha—in shadows, or at twilight—before realizing their error, reacting furiously,

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as if she was making a fool of them by deliberately posing as straight-A's, basketball-heaving Johnny. Why shouldn't it have been the other way round: why shouldn't he have felt insecure in *his* identity, rather than her? If ever boys accosted him by mistake, he didn't seem to care. He wasn't too interested in girls; the design of different sorts of bodies loomed in his head. Sometimes Martha had burned with the desire to touch and be touched. Did boys avoid her because they felt they might be lured into displaced gay activity?

"Johnny screwed up," she told Angelica. "He ought to have owned FaCADes. He wasn't enough in touch with the real world."

In a narrow lane near the Cathedral, they passed a toyshop. The window exhibited an eighteen-inch high holog of the "basic" Sagrada Familia beside a somewhat larger plastic model. The porch beneath the belfries was the maw of some sea-monster with multiple mouths. A tiny hunched demon made of painted lead wielded a cudgel in the entry. An army of miniature trolls and werebeasts occupied the checkered floor of the roofless nave within. Similar little creatures strode about the holog. These models of Sagrada Familia were scenery for a role-playing game!

"What's this?" gasped Martha.

"It's called the Game of Good and Evil. Just new in the shops. The Devotees are very annoyed. They say it's blasphemous. They're trying for a court injunction. They're suing the manufacturers. I think it's funny."

The outer façade was rough and smudged, as if chocolate had melted, then set into teeth and foliage and figures. Trumpeting angels and saints were the rock climbers here. By contrast, the inner façade was starkly geometrical: ledges, niches, and balconies where pterodactyl-like demons roosted. Martha's fingers itched to swoop a herald angel down from outside, a pterodemon from its ledge within; to pit them in combat on the board of the nave, trumpet against talons.

"The whole thing's inside-out, isn't it? Surely the forces of righteousness ought to be *in* the church, and the forces of evil outside attacking it? The church is full of demons!"

Angelica peered. "Maybe the shop owner is an atheist? So he chooses to set the figures out that way, to be naughty. I saw the manufacturer on TV last week. He argued that this shows kids the eternal guerrilla war between the Devil and the Angels for control of the cosmos, so it raises kids' spirituality. Or something. I hear the plastic version's better, less limiting. As well as cheaper. The game comes with all sorts of rules and dice and cards."

"People must be focusing a whole lot of attention upon Sagrada Familia these days."

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"Sure. Of course. But *this*," and Angelica gestured at the window, "is a rip-off."

Martha had been toying with the notion of buying the Game of Good and Evil, plastic version—not holog, oh no. A bulky item, in its box. Ultimately vulgar. She discarded the idea. They walked on.

Presently they reached what seemed a triangular wedge of bomb site: churned earth, a semblance of concreting.

"See the plaque on that wall there? It translates, 'No traitors are buried here.' Here's where they put the corpses of Catalan patriots who were killed when the Spanish took over. We're digging up the old bones for reburial. Holding masses in this church." A church façade towered over the narrow street. "Typical Catalan Baroque."

Martha was unsure whether Angelica was alluding to the architectural style or to local behavior.

"Hey, see *him*—?" Two somber men in dark suits were quitting the church. "He's the leader of the Catalan Communist Party. The other guy, with the moustache: I recognize him from his photo. He's the boss of the Italian communists."

"Communists going to church?"

"That's nationalism for you."

After some paprika-spiced octopus, fried potatoes, and beer, they caught a taxi uphill to the Park Güell overlooking the city. Disney gatehouses frosted with ceramic icing gave entry to a mosaic staircase. Curving side walls were tipped with jutting vertebrae, or were the spare ribs of a dinosaur. Roaming amidst shrubs, opuntias, and palms, Angelica coaxed stray scraggy tom cats whose elevated tails revealed big balls.

"Another masterpiece, another failure," she said. "This was intended to be a garden township. Only a couple of plots were ever sold, and Gaudí bought one himself. So it's a garden instead . . . I often take a stray cat to the vet's. I have it patched up and injected and given vitamins."

"Does it get neutered too?"

Angelica disregarded the question. She had spotted another battle-scarred tom, which they followed under a cavernous viaduct. Up top the roadway was lined with urns. Agaves were succulent green flames rising from those flambeaux. In the sloping interior below, columns leaned in a long row like trees half blown over. Stone facings were scales which overhead became great jagged teeth hanging in defiance of gravity. Martha and her escort could have been walking through the gullet of some fossil beast with a vast neck, a gullet crowned with hundreds of fangs. The tom-cat hissed and eluded Angelica.

Out in the open once more, Martha admired the mosaic benches until their sinuousity reminded her of the writhing of a serpent. Afar below, the enhanced completed church reared. The Mediterranean beyond didn't

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look at all menacing, as though it had never moved an inch from where it had always been.

Five o'clock. "Time to meet the big one," said Angelica. Did she mean the church, or Martha's brother?

By the time their taxi had scooted straight as a bobsled among dozens of others down the Carrer de Sardenya to deposit them outside a turnstile gate, the greater church was switched off. The last tourists of the day flocked out to waiting buses. So many Japanese faces! Somebody had spray-painted a black slogan on the nearest wall: BAJAD EL VOLUMEN DEL CARILLON.

"Lower the noise of the bells," Angelica translated. "If Gaudí's dream of giant organs had come true, what a concert for the neighborhood!"

Martha gaped up at the belfries while Angelica was phoning from the concierge's hut.

When Johnny and Salvador rendezvoused with the two women inside the gaping whale-mouth, Johnny was dressed in jeans and a black sweater. Not what he'd been wearing at breakfast! She hadn't even known that he owned a dark sweater. Had he changed as soon as she left the hotel with Angelica? How dare he? Brother and sister were almost wearing clone clothes.

"Bit of daylight left," he said breezily. "Anyway, the floodlighting and the holog will illuminate everything just fine. I'm going hunting. Want to come? I could use a spotter or two. Salvador needs to stay below to operate the controls."

Both men had mini radios clipped to their pockets. Johnny, who was also armed with binoculars and a camera, offered a spare radio to his sister. She stared pointedly at his garb till finally he cottoned on, at least to a certain degree.

"It's chilly. Salvador leant me a sweater. Come on inside . . ."

Accepting the radio, she followed him past plaster of Paris models and displays of postcards. Inside, naturally, was also outside, since no roof existed. Half of the interior space was a warren of stacked dressed stone, scaffolding, huts, lifting gear, all seemingly abandoned. Masonry must be a dusty occupation. She noticed the pavilion-like altar, and some of the holography equipment, whatever it was. Techno stuff. Whatever cluttered the ground was of no importance. Her gaze drifted up the inside of the shell. How faithful that plastic model had been: all those ledges, niches; yet not a single pterodemon in sight.

The four people crossed to the base of the far belfries. Johnny stared upward critically, as he once had assessed the hoop at basketball. Still annoyed at how alike she and her twin were clad, Martha shuddered more with irritation than anxiety as she looked up again. Oh yes, Johnny

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would shin up inside these fluted belfries, just like an action-man doll dressed for the part. It was all just an idea to him, anyway, a schematic. Probably he saw himself as a mouse on a computer screen chasing the errant blob of whatever, to delete it. Competent, competent.

The run-up to the FaCADes fiasco had been a different story. But would she have really wanted riches for her brother? Would she really have wanted for Johnny to be in a position to patronize her? Literally patronize: pumping an injection of capital into her pottery business, lining up publicity and buyers, marketing her, giving the nod or the thumbs-down to designs. Maybe it was just as well that he hadn't managed to market himself, only sell himself off.

Frankly, she and Ray were poor, but they still got by in their partnership up in Marin County. The blind man, and the duplicated woman: a Xerox of her brother, as if Mom and Dad hadn't enough genetic coinage between them to afford two separate individuals. Mom and Dad had dressed the twins alike for years, in a unisex economy drive. For a while, way back when, Martha had taken to following three synchronized steps behind Johnny. He had been born first; *he* was the original. Could she help it that her body language or her liking for caramel chip ice cream were the same? Blame the genes. Did she and Johnny dream the same dreams? Did they think in tune? What went on in her head was her *own*. The pressure of the outside world imposed upon her, nevertheless, urging her always to react as he did. After they went to different schools, life had improved. Ray valued her for what he *couldn't* see. Zen love.

Johnny was Spain, she thought, and she was Catalonia. So how could he possibly understand this temple of Gaudí's? She was here at his expense, otherwise she would never have got to Barcelona at all. She was enjoying the crumbs of his crumbs. Johnny seemed unaware that he only had crumbs. It would be cruel to enlighten him. She would be kicking an eager puppy in the face.

A sign pointed towards an elevator. So they wouldn't need to climb the entire way. At the doorway to the belfry, another sign pictured a savage black hound leaping away from a snapped chain. From six P.M. till six A.M. the beast was let loose. She imagined that the ghost that people had been seeing was the black hound roaming up aloft. Of course the animal couldn't have trodden on air.

"No guard dogs on site tonight," Johnny reassured her. Salvador departed to whichever shed housed the controls. "You coming up top?" Johnny asked Angelica.

"Why not? I have never actually—"

"Been up there! That's how it is when you live near somewhere famous." Chuckling, Johnny led the two women up some steps to the little elevator and tugged the grill door open.

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Quiet terror beat its wings within Martha. The narrowest of stone stairways spiraled upward, affording barely enough space for people to pass each other if one breathed in and hugged the wall. An inner balustrade gave on to a plunging well. Eyes of floodlights looked straight up from the bottom. Since Martha was tall and skinny, it seemed all too conceivable that she might lean between the stone uprights and plunge down the well. Mouths in the outer wall, the air vents placed every yard or so were drooping lips of stone easily large enough to slide through. Those vents were very similar in fact to the start of a slide, the first two feet of a slide—followed by emptiness, then by the ground far below. Should she stick her head and shoulders into a mouth, should she push with her feet . . . she would fly down; she would die.

She was trapped in a sieve, tapering upwards toward the slimmest of cones. How could these stones hold together? Why didn't those lips fall from the vents? Why didn't the stairway collapse inwards down the shaft? The wind blew through the walls, pushing at her.

As they mounted in single file, Johnny setting the pace, Angelica began to whimper.

They reached an open-air bridge leading to an adjoining belfry. Below, displayed all around, was Barcelona. Very much below. Martha noticed a rooftop swimming pool. The lake in the Plaça de Gaudí looked so shallow, only inches deep. Everywhere else: relentlessly hard surfaces. . . . She gazed from the bridge up at the tips of the towers, at the bobbly alien flowers, the faceted, tilting planes of fractured tile. Even in the dying grey light, she responded to their luminosity. If this edifice was a tree, ceramics were the flowers and fruit of the tree, the aim, the pinnacle. Descending mosaic letters spelled the words *Hosanna* and *Excelsis*. Little nubs of stone jutted as if to provide footing for suicidal steeplejacks.

Angelica clung to the bridge wall. "Vertigo," she moaned, half humorously, half desperately. "My legs are giving way. I haven't felt like this for years."

"You're using muscles you aren't used to using," explained Johnny. "There's some distance yet to climb. You okay, Sis?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" Martha had also been climbing awkwardly, as if drunk, bumping against a wall, stumbling over steps. In the core of her being the fear still fluttered, but numbingly so. It anesthetized her, detached her.

"This isn't my muscles," Angelica insisted, "it's *vertigo*."

"Maybe you'd better go down?"

"Yes! Yes!" Angelica fled back inside the belfry.

Johnny unclipped his radio. "Salvador, let's have the floods."

Blue light filled the belfries, as if the contents of a tropical lagoon had

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welled up. A remote squeal of surprise reached their ears. Angelica, suddenly illuminated. Quitting the bridge, Martha and Johnny wended upward through blue air, higher, higher inside the other belfry. A shorter bridge—a bond between Siamese twins—led to a further belfry. They descended for a few circuits till another short bridge took them—surely back into the previous belfry? Or was this another one? Martha was lost. She had no idea of the route back to the elevator. How could there be so many stairways, bridges, all so similar? Was Johnny leading her up and down and up because he wasn't too familiar with this maze either? He hummed to himself, pausing to check his bearings via the air vents.

"Here will do fine." He addressed the radio: "Okay, Salvador, switch on number three holog." He told Martha, "Number three's the most interconnected. Why don't you watch from this vent? I'll nip over to the next belfry."

"You're leaving me here?"

"Two points of view!" He demonstrated how to operate the radio.

A vaster church shimmered into being, outside and above, spires aiming to cleave the clouds, dwarfing their belfry to a foothill. The new edifice, aglow, was perfectly convincing: giant veined towers with half-hooded vents, linked to the original mass by arching bridges. Johnny hadn't yet had the opportunity to abandon her. "Look, Johnny, look there!"

Something golden had crossed behind an embrasure in a phantom spire. It passed another vent, descending. Lining up his camera, Johnny clicked it rapidly as again the target partly revealed itself. Partly. Martha couldn't identify the golden ghost. What on earth *was* it? But then, it wasn't *on* earth. It was treading unreal holographic stairs.

"You're my luck, Sis. Let's head closer."

"Don't call me that. I use *your* name, Johnny."

"You nervous?"

"Oh, forget it."

Johnny rushed ahead, careering down steps. No, not *ahead*, but around and around. By the time she came to a junction, he was out of sight. The flood of blue radiance pouring up from the well stopped her from seeing if he was lower down the stairs. She couldn't hear the thud of his shoes. She shouted, "Which way, Johnny?"

His answer came through most of the sound boards of the next belfry. "This way! Hurry!" He must have crossed over the bridge, so she did likewise. Did he then descend or ascend?

"Johnny?" she radioed. "Up or down?"

"I'm heading up." He was panting. So she climbed.

She hesitated at the portal to another bridge. The brightness of the

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greater church blinded her. Night air buffeted her. Floodlighting in the next belfry transformed its vents into windows of turquoise stained glass.

She screamed. In the doorway beyond the humpback of the bridge: a dragon. Golden-scaled, gilded pterodactyl wings, claws like the buckled tines of a fork left to rust in a field, a long rattlesnake tail. . . . Amber eyes glinted. Wings rustled and twanged. A mouth of nail-teeth gaped. A blade of a tongue licked out, tasting the breeze, and her. The dragon hopped out onto the bridge. It was approximately Angelica's size.

When Martha ducked back inside the belfry, she clearly heard the metallic scrabble of the creature crossing the remainder of the bridge. She fled up, round, up again. How far did she flee? She halted breathless, forced herself to listen.

Scritch, scratch, clack-clack, thump. A loud hiss, as of steam escaping below. The spook was in the real building with her! The black dog was loose! But this wasn't any dog. This was a dragon, Gaudí's dragon. The primeval image impaled on the pavilion gate, roosting on the Casa Battló, submerged in the park—it had gathered, it had emerged.

"Johnny," she whispered into the radio.

"Can hardly hear you, Sis! I lost the darn thing." His electronic words echoed loudly in the confined turret. *Hiss*, below.

"For God's sake keep your voice down. It's in this belfry with me."

"Can't be, Sis. It lives in holograph land."

"I tell you, it's *here*."

"Where's here?"

"I don't know." *Rustle, hiss.* She must escape: up, over a bridge, down, around, up.

"Hey, Sis, come in will you?" blared the radio, pinpointing her. Furiously she pitched the wretched thing over the balustrade. Johnny's voice fell away down the well. Maybe the dragon would follow that noise instead. If she and Johnny had been together, they might have confused the creature by brother going up, sister going down, then ducking back to tantalize it before one headed left, the other right, running interference for each other. The dragon might have assumed they were both the same person, and wouldn't have known which to chase. A person who could appear and disappear at will. She and Johnny had played that trick whenever a new kid moved into the neighborhood; until the game sickened her. Johnny wasn't here to play. The night breeze plucked at her, fingers reaching through stone. *Hiss.* She fled.

She was gasping as though she had climbed so high up a mountain that she couldn't drag enough air into her lungs. Her ears rang. Her legs ached now with a jellifying ache. Johnny couldn't have kept up such a pace. His basketball days, when he could dance around a court, were

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long past. Too much time spent sitting in front of VDUs. But she'd kept in trim. Not just her hands by pummeling clay. Her long legs by jogging—in her hunter-red tracksuit up and down roads lined with redwoods between drippy foggy sixty-degree hillsides. So steep that homes on stilts cantilevered out among the crowns of redwoods, seeming buttressed by tree trunks.

None of which had really prepared her muscles for this flight through Sagrada Familia, pursued by the hiss, the clack of claws, rustle of wings. Leaning into a vent to support herself while she sucked oxygen, she gazed out and thought she had gone insane.

She was looking down upon the cruciform ceramic flowers that tipped the tops of the belfries. *Down* upon them, *down*. And those belfries were the highest peaks of the real Sagrada Familia, of the actual church!

The staircase where she now found herself spiraled less tightly, the wall curved more gently, embrasures were further apart. She wasn't in any belfry at all. Hurrying round a quarter circuit and clinging to a different vent she gaped: at twin spires. She was high up Biggest Boy, the tallest holographic spire of all . . .

"No," she whispered. "No . . ." Briefly the stone seemed to weaken under her hand, the step to soften beneath her sneakers. Sickeningly, she imagined herself sinking down through stone which suddenly turned to water, to air, releasing her to fall from a vast height.

"No!" she cried. This was a different denial, a refusal to let the spectral stone betray her. Gaudí's whole church was in existence now, all of it. What had that Devotee told Johnny? About a higher geometry which underlay the universe, which was the quintessence of reality? All around her unfolded Gaudí's master equation of spirals, funicular arches, revolving parabolas, internal counterpoises, axes of symmetry, connections. It didn't matter if this was inscribed in stone or in light or a blend of both. She had trodden most of the route through this equation obliviously, chased by the dragon. So long as she didn't deny her position now, it would sustain her, hold her up. She dared not deny it, or she would fall.

Could Johnny spy her even now with his binoculars, as she ranged through the holographic church? Could he spy the monster that hunted her? A golden power with claws and teeth, the dragon from the heart of reality. The dragon . . . of death?

Hiss! Ssssss. She staggered upward. Walls were pinching in. No more bridges, no more alternatives. A final turn. The steps stopped at a grill. Beyond that grill: only the top of the spire-well, summit of emptiness, a final cone of roof above. In any case the grille was locked. She backed against it. *Iss. Sissss.*

"Hosanna!" she cried defiantly. "Excelsis!" So like some fundamentalist

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fanatic that she felt ashamed. How could *slogans* save her from the dragon?—which even now rounded that final bend, tiptoeing on those cruel clutchy claws, wings flapping limply against wall and inner balustrade to help lift it, that blade tongue questing for her, *ssss*. How its eyes glared! Despite herself, she admired it. The dragon lunged at Martha.

Somehow she was alive; somehow she *was* the dragon. Exaltation filled her. She thought of angels with their radiance and their many shining wings. She thought of grimacing batwing devils. A dragon wasn't a demon *or* an angel. It was a being which had arisen from the earth, not descended from the sky. Even devils once hailed from the sky, from the immaterial geometric realm, the domain of theology, cerebral cybernetics. Whereas a dragon arose from rock and soil and ore and clay. Its vertebrae were the backbones of hills, its ribs defined valleys, its mouth was any cave. A dragon arose from the same clay out of which the human race came, if archeozoic clay had indeed printed out the first primitive matrix of reproduction, as some scientists said. The same clay which made pots.

She knew that in a sense the dragon had not been chasing her. On the contrary, she had been luring *it*. By fleeing from the dragon, forcing it to follow her through the geometries of the church, she had compelled it to come all the way, to herd her upward, hissing, *sisssing*. The dragon existed to panic her into forgetting that these spires did not exist. To turn a thought into a substance.

She was wandering, wandering, down, around, across and down, letting her aching legs guide her. She had been as high as she could go; nowhere was higher. Now she returned. Now she descended. She recognized her surroundings. She was in a belfry again, a belfry built of stone. Solid, albeit honeycombed by holes.

At that moment the greater church switched off; the holog vanished. Through a vent she regarded the abyss lit by blue seepage from the belfries, black bumps of masonry and machines at the base. She was near a familiar grill door. She pressed a button to summon the elevator from below. She rode it down. To where Johnny waited, with Angelica.

"Where did you get off to, Sis? Soon as I lost the bogey I looked everywhere for you."

"You couldn't have looked where I went."

"I swear I checked all the belfries. Why didn't you use your radio?"

"I dropped it."

"Shit. You might have shouted."

"It's rude to shout in church," said Martha.

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"I get it. You were playing hide and seek, like when we were kids."

No, that wasn't the game they had played all those years ago. His memory was false. Why seek someone who looked so much like yourself? They had both played at foxing some naïve stranger. For that matter, why *hide* from yourself? Ah, that was different. . . . And at last she had been found, by a wild vigor that had been awaiting her, awaiting *somebody*, anybody suitable, so as to discharge itself like lightning surging down a conductor from the abstract sky where it had been conjured, back into the clotted, fertile, tactile soil, its element. But first, the chosen host must elevate itself—herself—as high as could be. By learning to walk on air. Now that her feet were on the ground, she viewed the dragon in a new light.

"What do you suppose the photos will show?" asked Angelica.

"We'll develop them pronto tomorrow. Computer-enhance 'em, if necessary. Me, I couldn't make out what it was supposed to be."

"But it was real?"

"Real? If it isn't a bug in the program, then at most it's an electromagnetic hallucination."

"A what?"

"I guess there's an electromagnetic field associated with the holog. Maybe under special atmospheric conditions. All this cloud cover, freak weather . . . well, you know, if you induce a small electrical current across a person's scalp, they start to see things."

"Really?"

How smug Johnny looked. "The bit of the brain called the hippocampus is very unstable electrically. The hippocampus is an important part of the emotion and memory systems. Tickle that with electricity, and you might see all kinds of deep images that otherwise are suppressed from your consciousness—except in dreams."

"I don't know what *I* dream. But it sends me on journeys!"

"Monsters, archetypes . . . ghosts. They'd seem as real as your hand. We haven't had this problem with other façades. No Shakespeare's ghost haunting Anne Hathaway's Cottage, no no, no way. But Sagrada Familia is the big one. There's more power involved here. Salvador and I will do some testing tomorrow, check out any electromagnetic fields. If that's the explanation, I'm hardly surprised I didn't see anything clearly. Me, I'm not much into the writhings of the subconscious."

Angelica cocked her head. "So if the camera captured an image, you're dealing with a bug. If it didn't—" She tapped her scalp, beneath her blonde bush of hair.

Martha had listened in disgust. "Did you suspect this brain electricity thing before we flew out here?"

Johnny grinned. "It was a possibility. FaCADes needs to know. Can't

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have our customers spooked. Personally I rate this as a low possibility, but I did think about it on and off while I was busy, you know, researching the concept in the first place."

While you were failing, she thought, to keep financial control of the concept. You were bothering your brain about electromagnetic ghosts. Not *authentic* ones, of course.

"I ruled it out," said Johnny.

An electromagnetic ghost could *not*, she reminded herself, cause a human being to walk in the sky.

"And you did need a vacation, hmm?"

No, Johnny, you didn't see anything clearly. Least of all me in any of the belfries—because I simply wasn't there.

Salvador was bustling toward them across the littered nave, miming the act of hoisting a beer glass . . .

On the Pan-Am clipper flight back home a week later, Johnny said, "'fraid it *wasn't* much of a holiday, Sis, with you moping most of the time in the Cristina Gran. Even when the sun came out."

The day after she climbed those belfries, the weather had relented. Spring—no, full Summer—arrived. Barcelona began to bake and broil. Drains started to smell.

"I wasn't moping. I was . . . centering myself."

"Is that what it was? First I've ever heard of centering. Poor Angelica thought you were sulking; decided you didn't like her. I told her you caught a bug; probably from the seafood. Ah, what a waste of time."

"I saw all I needed to see."

His photos had come out crap. They might as well have been shot into the sun. Not even a computer could make head or tail of them. As for electromagnetic fields, maybe the abrupt meteorological shift had swept those away—till another season? Johnny and Salvador had detected nothing untoward. Johnny had climbed the church on five further evenings, in vain. The problem seemed to have disappeared.

"You didn't even visit the Picasso museum."

"When I wasn't centering, I walked a bit."

"Pooh. Did that tad of gunfire scare you? Was being in a foreign city such a shock?"

"I saw, Johnny, believe me. I *saw*."

Her brother writhed to adjust his knees behind the backward-tilted seat in front of him. The hotel had been four-star, but this flight was economy. Martha centered herself and didn't worry about cramp.

She carried the dragon within her. When she got back among the misty redwoods, she would show the beast to Ray in such a way that her blind lover would know it too. ●

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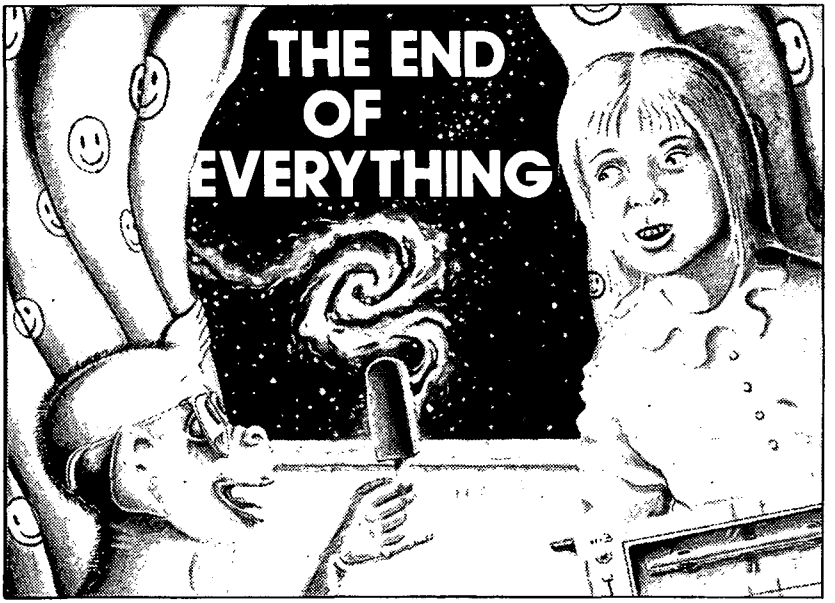

by Kathryn Cramer

Kathryn Cramer and her co-editor, Peter Pautz, received a 1988 World Fantasy Award for their anthology, *The Architecture of Fear* (Arbor House, 1987). Ms. Cramer is also the editor, with David G. Hartwell, of the anthology, *Christmas Ghosts.* The following tale is her first to be published in *IAsfm.*

art: John Barrick

The alien's pink nose quivered in the chilly morning air. Clenching and unclenching its six-fingered front paws and hanging upside down from the curtain rod by its prehensile toes—each with its own half-moon of toenail, small as a baby's—it watched the girl sleep. It tried whistling, rattling the curtain rod, scraping its fingernails on the window pane in hopes that she would wake up. She slept soundly.

It stared out the window, watching the July sun inch across the damp green of suburban lawns, watching the paper boy ride by on his bike and toss a newspaper on each porch he passed. The alien, naked except for a pair of mirror shades which covered its large, sensitive eyes, was up-

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holstered with plush brown fur and had a black stripe running up its curved spine. It retained the mirror shades only with difficulty, as they were not intended to be worn while hanging upside down, nor by aliens.

After yawning, stretching, rubbing the sleep out of her pale blue eyes, and hopping out of bed to greet the day, blonde, nine-year-old Trina was surprised to find a naked alien suspended from her curtain rod. She pulled her pink flannel nightie down over her knees and looked at the second hand of her alarm clock, intending to time how long her unexpected guest could hang upside down to plus or minus one second.

"Hi!" it said. "Would *you* like to make a *deal?*" Although it spoke several octaves too high and one octave to the left, its squeal had all the intonations of a TV game show host. Since Trina was a television child, she knew what to do.

"What can I win?" she said, inclining her little blonde head to the right, squinting, looking for the strings that controlled it. She didn't see any.

"*Thousands* of dollars in prizes! Today we're giving away a toaster oven, a brand new car, and our *grand prize:* an all-expenses-paid tour of *nearby star systems!*" Pushing its mirror shades up onto the bridge of its flat, slightly flared nose, it stretched out a leg and, curling its foot into a fist, it groomed the thick fur of its thigh. Trina looked at the clock. One minute and forty seconds had elapsed. She supposed that the thing must be showing off by hanging upside down by only one leg.

"What do I have to do to win?" she asked, chewing on a wispy strand of hair. Before it could reply, she said, "You don't look like a game show host to me, more like a talking slow loris. What show are you from? I don't remember seeing you on TV."

"My show will premiere next season," it said. "I'm from a race of hyper-intelligent and multi-talented alien beings who detected life on this planet by picking up television and radio broadcasts, which is how I learned to speak English so well. My family has been genetically engineered so that humans will think we are cute. Ultimately, my species plans to conquer Earth and enslave humanity, but until we get around to it, we will be content to be game show hosts and extras in science fiction films. The pilot for my new show, the name of which is a closely guarded secret, is being filmed *right this very moment.* They're gonna *love* it in Hollywood! Primetime! Big bucks!"

Trina frowned. Her mother wouldn't be happy when her messy room appeared on nationwide television. A jumble of toys and clothes spilled out of the closet. Twenty-three teddy bears and sixteen Brenda dolls were stacked haphazardly on gold-trimmed, french provincial style shelves. The walls were covered with crayon drawings, and, although most of the

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drawings were on newsprint, a few had been drawn directly on the walls. The ceiling sloped in two directions, meeting in a peak at the middle of the room. The room was two or three times the size of her friends' bedrooms because it was an attic which her parents had finished and turned into a bedroom.

"For a self-cleaning *Sunshine* toaster oven with step-saver attachments, would you rather an elephant kill you or a gorilla?" The alien crawled down the smiley-face patterned curtains head first and sat down on the floor, and then it removed the mirror shades, revealing two huge red eyes. It scratched pensively behind its left ear—a hairy flap of skin like a guinea pig's ear—with its left foot. She checked the clock: five minutes and twenty-six seconds.

She pondered the question. Elephants seemed friendlier and were more likely to kill you by stepping on you, picking you up with their trunks and dropping you, or by goring you with their sharp tusks. Gorillas, it seemed to her, were more likely to bite you, hit you, or pull your arm off. So she was about to guess "elephant" when she remembered that this was just a dumb joke she had heard in her third grade class.

"I'd rather have the elephant kill the gorilla."

"Congratulations! You have just won a *new toaster oven!*" The room shimmered, giving Trina goosebumps, and the next thing she knew there was a toaster oven in the corner of the room, next to a glass of water with a rotten potato in it—her science project from last March, which she had quite forgotten.

It was nice she thought, but what use had she for a toaster oven? Perhaps it could be a tanning booth for her Brenda doll. She plugged the toaster oven into the nearest wall socket and, to see if it worked, put her Suntanning Brenda doll in it. When the doll was subjected to heat it would turn from a pale ivory to the color of a roasted marshmallow. Although the manufacturers intended that the doll be set in the sun, Trina understood the scientific principles involved and knew that any old heat source would do.

The heating element glowed red. Slowly the doll's pale skin tanned brown, as advertised. Before Trina had time to remove it, the ends of its hair began to fizzle. Its toes softened and drooped. The nylon bathing suit melted. The smell of burning plastic drifted through the room. Hoping that one of her parents wouldn't come up and investigate just now, she turned off the oven and tossed the doll in the back of her closet.

Trina pondered the problem of keeping her parents out of her room. Her father could probably be kept out, but her mother was determined that Trina clean her room today. Maybe if she denied knowing how the toaster oven got there . . . she would say that it was there when she woke

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up and that maybe a thief broke in and left it there during the night. The idea of lying frightened her, but she couldn't just tell her parents.

"What else can I win?" she asked.

"For a *brand new* lemon-yellow Porsche, why can't you starve to death in the desert?"

"Because of all the sand which is there." she said. She knew that one too. Didn't it know any *hard* questions?

The room shimmered again, and at the far end of the room was a lemon-yellow Porsche. She was excited, but was unsure whether any of this was real, and even if it was, she had no clue as to how she was going to transport a new car down the steep stairs. So she was as much frightened as happy. Maybe if she took it apart and carried it peice by peice . . . before she could even begin to worry about the complexities of the problems presented by the car and the toaster oven, the alien asked the final question.

"For our grand prize, an all-expenses-paid tour of the nearby star systems, what is the end of everything? Think carefully, because if you answer *this* question correctly, then you, yes *you*, can boldly go where no little girl has ever gone before: Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and yes, even *Alpha Centauri!*"

If she won, she thought, it would be a solution to all of her problems. If she could just fly away, she wouldn't have to explain anything. She was confused and frightened, but at the same time she was caught up in the thrill of victory. This question had to be a serious one. The end of everything . . . She thought deeply.

"Nuclear war?" she said.

"Wrong! The correct answer is . . . *the letter G*! You have missed out on the all-expenses-paid tour, but just for being on our show you get a ten dollar gift certificate applicable to a trip to Hawaii on Standby Airlines, and . . . *a year's supply of Igloo Bars!* These delicious ice cream bars are the ideal dessert for every day of the year. Chocolate outside, vanilla ice cream inside, they're oh so good!"

Now Trina was excited. Ice cream bars were the first thing he had offered that seemed to her of any practical value. The room shimmered again, and many, many boxes of Igloo Bars appeared in the driver's and passenger's seats of the Porsche. She could just taste the crunch of chocolate, feel the softness of ice cream melting on her tongue. . . .

Melting ice cream.

"Don't I get a freezer to go along with the ice cream? We don't have room for all those ice cream bars in our freezer. We only have a little one."

"Absolutely not. Greedy child. I have been warned about the greed of your species. We ask only three questions per contestant, and under

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absolutely *no* circumstances are contestants allowed to request specific prizes."

"But where will I keep them all!" she wailed.

The alien shrugged with elaborate unconcern, and then began to shimmer. As it faded from view it said, "Tune in *next* week when another contestant will have three chances to win *thousands* of dollars in prizes. . . ."

Trina touched the car door handle, but then thought better of it, realizing that if she came down to breakfast holding an ice-cream bar, regardless of origin, she would be in trouble.

Trina walked slowly downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast. Her father was standing in the kitchen reading a newspaper, his car keys dangling from his right hand. He was dressed in cut-off jeans and a Michelob T-shirt. "How long does it take an ice cream bar to melt?" she said as she sat down at the table.

"Depends on the temperature and the wind speed."

"How hot does it get in my room, for example?"

"Given that this is July and the air conditioner is broken, and that your room is at the top of the house, and that heat rises, oh, maybe 95 degrees by three this afternoon. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason . . ." she said in a quiet little voice.

A half-hour later, Trina sat beneath the Henderson family beach umbrella, surrounded by a crowd of thirty or forty children—all the kids she knew in the neighborhood, and some she didn't. She sat with her hands folded in front of her on an antique end table which had belonged to her mother's great aunt Sarah. The table was piled with ice cream bars, and there were many more where those had come from. Above her head hung a sign which was attached to the beach umbrella by clothes pins:

IGLOO BARS 3¢ EACH. ALSO PORSCHE AND TOASTER OVEN CHEAP.

The ice cream bars were selling fast. . . . ●

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One of Robert Silverberg's most recent tales for *IAsfm*, "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another," was nominated for the Nebula award for Best Novelette and is currently a finalist on the Hugo ballot. His latest story is a spellbinding alternate history tale of adventure in the African kingdom of Songhay where it is . . .

LION TIME IN TIMBUCTOO

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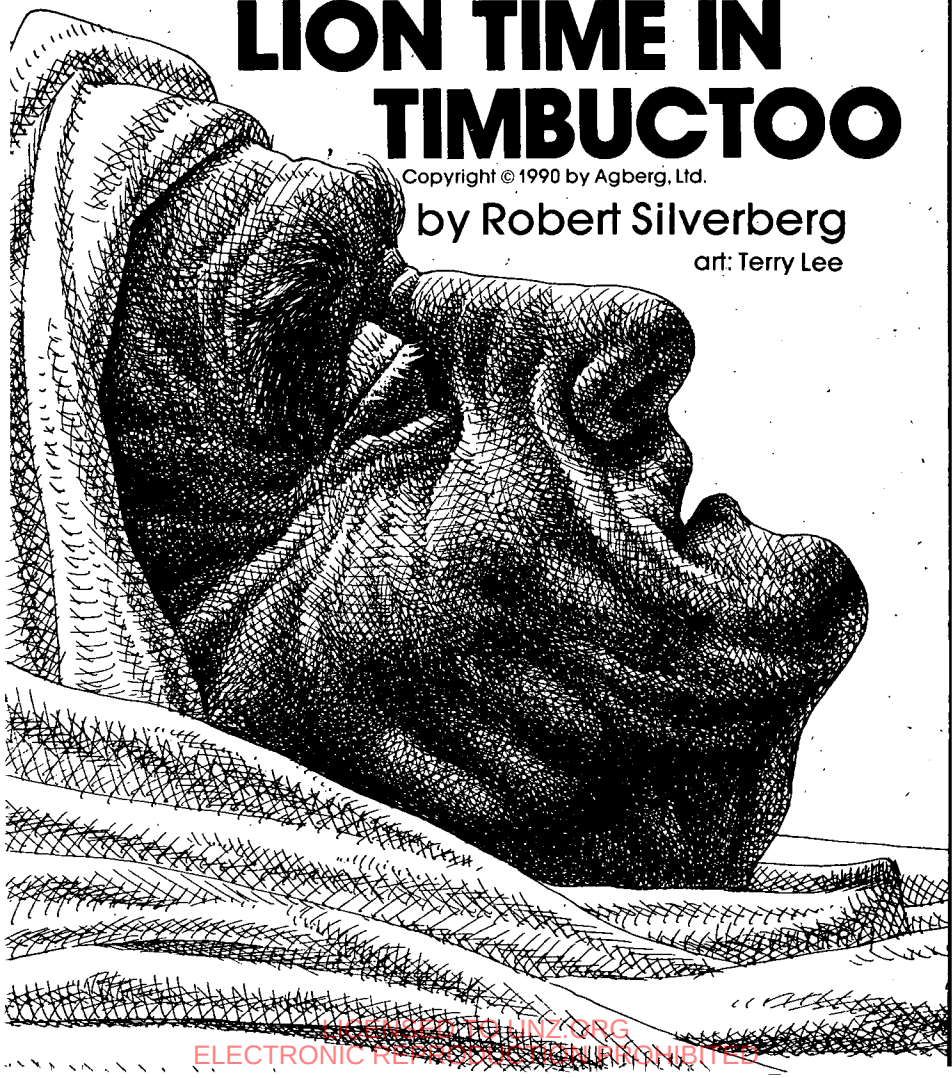
by Robert Silverberg

art: Terry Lee



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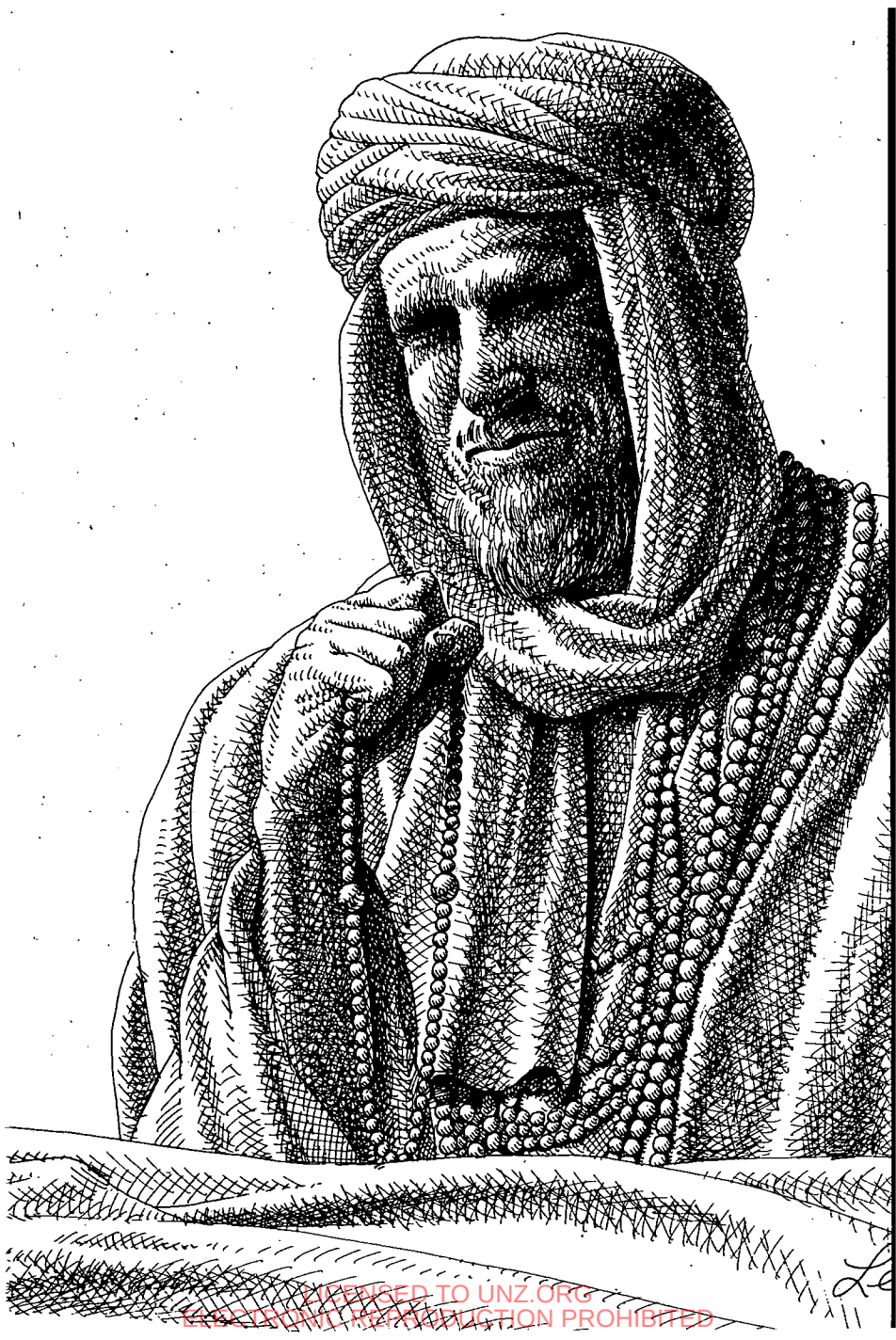

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LION TIME IN TIMBUCTOO: introduction

There's one tricky aspect about writing alternate-history stories, which is what "Lion Time in Timbuctoo" is: how to let the reader know the point at which your imaginary world's history diverges from our reality. Sometimes the writer can drag in soothsayers, visions, dreams, or the clever speculation of some smarty-pants character to communicate the necessary information. Sometimes the writer simply cheats, by sticking the information in as exposition. ("Whereas in our world, where France actually did have a revolution in 1789 . . .") Sometimes it's absolutely obvious from the context that the story is set in an alternate world. ("One sunny day in 1978, as former President John F. Kennedy opened his morning newspaper . . .") And sometimes the writer just has to write a preface to spell things out. Which is what I'm doing right now.

"Lion Time in Timbuctoo" is related, in a way, to an alternate-universe novel I wrote many years ago called "The Gate of Worlds," in which I used the device of a soothsayer to make my divergence point clear. It didn't seem cricket to do that again. What I postulated, in that earlier story (which takes place in an alternate 1963, in a New World ruled by Aztecs and Incas) is that the Black Death of 1348 was far more virulent than it had been in our reality, and wiped out three quarters of the population of Western Europe, instead of the one quarter it actually killed. Which left Europe shattered and defenseless against the imperial-minded Turks, who conquered everything in their way, right up to and including England. Thus the Renaissance never happened, nor the exploration of the New World, nor the European colonial expansion. The black kingdoms of Africa and the Mesoamerican empires of the New World remained independent. Technology was slow to develop. The Turks imposed Islam and the Turkish language on most of Europe.

And now it's the twentieth century in that other world. The Turkish empire has begun to decay, and is starting to break up. England has already regained its independence; other nations are pulling away. Meanwhile, in the ancient and great African kingdom of Songhay . . .

—R.S.

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In the dry stifling days of early summer the Emir lay dying, the king, the imam, Big Father of the Songhay, in his cool dark mud-walled palace in the Sankore quarter of Old Timbuctoo. The city seemed frozen, strange though it was to think of freezing in this season of killing heat that fell upon you like a wall of hot iron. There was a vast stasis, as though everything were entombed in ice. The river was low and sluggish, moving almost imperceptibly in its bed with scarcely more vigor than a sick weary crocodile. No one went out of doors, no one moved indoors, everyone sat still, waiting for the old man's death and praying that it would bring the cooling rains.

In his own very much lesser palace alongside the Emir's, Little Father sat still like all the rest, watching and waiting. His time was coming now at last. That was a sobering thought. How long had he been the prince of the realm? Twenty years? Thirty? He had lost count. And now finally to rule, now to be the one who cast the omens and uttered the decrees and welcomed the caravans and took the high seat in the Great Mosque. So much toil, so much responsibility: but the Emir was not yet dead. Not yet. Not quite.

"Little Father, the ambassadors are arriving."

In the arched doorway stood Ali Pasha, bowing, smiling. The vizier's face, black as ebony, gleamed with sweat, a dark moon shining against the lighter darkness of the vestibule. Despite his name, Ali Pasha was pure Songhay, black as sorrow, blacker by far than Little Father, whose blood was mixed with that of would-be conquerors of years gone by. The aura of the power that soon would be his was glistening and crackling around Ali Pasha's head like midwinter lightning: for Ali Pasha was the future Grand Vizier, no question of it. When Little Father became king, the old Emir's officers would resign and retire. An Emir's ministers did not hold office beyond his reign. In an earlier time they would have been lucky to survive the old Emir's death at all.

Little Father, fanning himself sullenly, looked up to meet his vizier's insolent grin.

"Which ambassadors, Ali Pasha?"

"The special ones, here to attend Big Father's funeral. A Turkish. A Mexican. A Russian. And an English."

"An English? Why an English?"

"They are a very proud people, now. Since their independence. How could they stay away? This is a very important death, Little Father."

"Ah. Ah, of course." Little Father contemplated the fine wooden Moorish grillwork that bedecked the doorway. "Not a Peruvian?"

"A Peruvian will very likely come on the next riverboat, Little Father. And a Maori one, and they say a Chinese. There will probably be others also. By the end of the week the city will be filled with dignitaries. This is the most important death in some years."

"A Chinese," Little Father repeated softly, as though Ali Pasha had said an ambassador from the Moon was coming. A Chinese! But yes, yes, this was a very important death. The Songhay Empire was no minor

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nation. Songhay controlled the crossroads of Africa; all caravans journeying between desert north and tropical south must pass through Songhay. The Emir of Songhay was one of the grand kings of the world.

Ali Pasha said acidly, "The Peruvian hopes that Big Father will last until the rains come, I suppose. And so he takes his time getting here. They are people of a high country, these Peruvians. They aren't accustomed to our heat."

"And if he misses the funeral entirely, waiting for the rains to come?"

Ali Pasha shrugged. "Then he'll learn what heat really is, eh, Little Father? When he goes home to his mountains and tells the Grand Inca that he didn't get here soon enough, eh?" He made a sound that was something like a laugh, and Little Father, experienced in his vizier's sounds, responded with a gloomy smile.

"Where are these ambassadors now?"

"At Kabara, at the port hostelry. Their riverboat has just come in. We've sent the royal barges to bring them here."

"Ah. And where will they stay?"

"Each at his country's embassy, Little Father."

"Of course. Of course. So no action is needed from me at this time concerning these ambassadors, eh, Ali Pasha?"

"None, Little Father." After a pause the vizier said, "The Turk has brought his daughter. She is very handsome." This with a rolling of the eyes, a baring of the teeth. Little Father felt a pang of appetite, as Ali Pasha had surely intended. The vizier knew his prince very well, too. "Very handsome, Little Father! In a white way, you understand."

"I understand. The English, did he bring a daughter too?"

"Only the Turk," said Ali Pasha.

"Do you remember the Englishwoman who came here once?" Little Father asked.

"How could I forget? The hair like strands of fine gold. The breasts like milk. The pale pink nipples. The belly-hair down below, like fine gold also."

Little Father frowned. He had spoken often enough to Ali Pasha about the Englishwoman's milky breasts and pale pink nipples. But he had no recollection of having described to him or to anyone else the golden hair down below. A rare moment of carelessness, then, on Ali Pasha's part; or else a bit of deliberate malice, perhaps a way of testing Little Father. There were risks in that for Ali Pasha, but surely Ali Pasha knew that. At any rate it was a point Little Father chose not to pursue just now. He sank back into silence, fanning himself more briskly.

Ali Pasha showed no sign of leaving. So there must be other news.

The vizier's glistening eyes narrowed. "I hear they will be starting the dancing in the marketplace very shortly."

Little Father blinked. Was there some crisis in the king's condition, then? Which everyone knew about but him?

"The death dance, do you mean?"

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"That would be premature, Little Father," said Ali Pasha unctuously. "It is the life dance, of course."

"Of course. I should go to it, in that case."

"In half an hour. They are only now assembling the formations. You should go to your father, first."

"Yes. So I should. To the Emir, first, to ask his blessing; and then to the dance."

Little Father rose.

"The Turkish girl," he said. "How old is she, Ali Pasha?"

"She might be eighteen. She might be twenty."

"And handsome, you say?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, very handsome, Little Father!"

There was an underground passageway connecting Little Father's palace to that of Big Father; but suddenly, whimsically, Little Father chose to go there by the out-of-doors way. He had not been out of doors in two or three days, since the worst of the heat had descended on the city. Now he felt the outside air hit him like the blast of a furnace as he crossed the courtyard and stepped into the open. The whole city was like a smithy these days, and would be for weeks and weeks more, until the rains came. He was used to it, of course, but he had never come to like it. No one ever came to like it except the deranged and the very holy, if indeed there was any difference between the one and the other.

Emerging onto the portico of his palace, Little Father looked out on the skyline of flat mud roofs before him, the labyrinth of alleys and connecting passageways, the towers of the mosques, the walled mansions of the nobility. In the hazy distance rose the huge modern buildings of the New City. It was late afternoon, but that brought no relief from the heat. The air was heavy, stagnant, shimmering. It vibrated like a live thing. All day long the myriad whitewashed walls had been soaking up the heat, and now they were beginning to give it back.

Atop the vibration of the air lay a second and almost tangible vibration, the tinny quivering sound of the musicians tuning up for the dance in the marketplace. The life dance, Ali Pasha had said. Perhaps so; but Little Father would not be surprised to find some of the people dancing the death dance as well, and still others dancing the dance of the changing of the king. There was little linearity of time in Old Timbuctoo; everything tended to happen at once. The death of the old king and the ascent of the new one were simultaneous affairs, after all: they were one event. In some countries, Little Father knew, they used to kill the king when he grew sick and feeble, simply to hurry things along. Not here, though. Here they danced him out, danced the new king in. This was a civilized land. An ancient kingdom, a mighty power in the world. He stood for a time, listening to the music in the marketplace, wondering if his father in his sickbed could hear it, and what he might be thinking, if he could. And he wondered too how it would feel when his own time came to lie abed listening to them tuning up in the market for the death dance. But

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then Little Father's face wrinkled in annoyance at his own foolishness. He would rule for many years; and when the time came to do the death dance for him out there he would not care at all. He might even be eager for it.

Big Father's palace rose before him like a mountain. Level upon level sprang upward, presenting a dazzling white façade broken only by the dark butts of the wooden beams jutting through the plaster and the occasional grillwork of a window. His own palace was a hut compared with that of the Emir. Implacable blue-veiled Tuareg guards stood in the main doorway. Their eyes and foreheads, all that was visible of their coffee-colored faces, registered surprise as they saw Little Father approaching, alone and on foot, out of the aching sunblink of the afternoon; but they stepped aside. Within, everything was silent and dark. Elderly officials of the almost-late Emir lined the hallways, grieving soundlessly, huddling into their own self-pity. They looked toward Little Father without warmth, without hope, as he moved past them. In a short while he would be king, and they would be nothing. But he wasted no energy on pitying them. It wasn't as though they would be fed to the royal lions in the imperial pleasure-ground, after all, when they stepped down from office. Soft retirements awaited them. They had had their greedy years at the public trough; when the time came for them to go, they would move along to villas in Spain, in Greece, in the south of France, in chilly remote Russia, even, and live comfortably on the fortunes they had embezzled during Big Father's lengthy reign. Whereas he, he, he, he was doomed to spend all his days in this wretched blazing city of mud, scarcely even daring ever to go abroad for fear they would take his throne from him while he was gone.

The Grand Vizier, looking twenty years older than he had seemed when Little Father had last seen him a few days before, greeted him formally at the head of the Stairs of Allah and said, "The imam your father is resting on the porch, Little Father. Three saints and one of the Tijani are with him."

"*Three* saints? He must be very near the end, then!"

"On the contrary. We think he is rallying."

"Allah let it be so," said Little Father.

Servants and ministers were everywhere. The place reeked of incense. All the lamps were lit, and they were flickering wildly in the conflicting currents of the air within the palace, heat from outside meeting the cool of the interior in gusting wafts. The old Emir had never cared much for electricity.

Little Father passed through the huge, musty, empty throne room, bedecked with his father's hunting trophies, the twenty-foot-long crocodile skin, the superb white oryx head with horns like scimitars, the hippo skulls, the vast puzzled-looking giraffe. The rich gifts from foreign monarchs were arrayed here, too, the hideous Aztec idol that King Moctezuma had sent a year or two ago, the brilliant feather cloaks from the Inca Capac Yupanqui of Peru, the immense triple-paneled gilded paint-

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ing of some stiff-jointed Christian holy men with which the Czar Vladimir had paid his respects during a visit of state a decade back, and the great sphere of ivory from China on which some master craftsman had carved a detailed map of the world, and much more, enough to fill half a storehouse. Little Father wondered if he would be able to clear all this stuff out when he became Emir.

In his lifetime Big Father had always preferred to hold court on his upstairs porch, rather than in this dark, cluttered, and somehow sinister throne room; and now he was doing his dying on the porch as well. It was a broad square platform, open to the skies but hidden from the populace below, for it was at the back of the palace facing toward the distant river and no one in the city could look into it.

The dying king lay swaddled, despite the great heat, in a tangle of brilliant blankets of scarlet and turquoise and lemon-colored silk on a rumpled divan to Little Father's left. He was barely visible, a pale sweaty wizened face and nothing more, amid the rumpled bedclothes. To the right was the royal roof-garden, a mysterious collection of fragrant exotic trees and shrubs planted in huge square porcelain vessels from Japan, another gift of the bountiful Czar. The dark earth that filled those blue-and-white tubs had been carried in panniers by donkeys from the banks of the Niger, and the plants were watered every evening at sunset by prisoners, who had to haul great leather sacks of immense weight to this place and were forbidden by the palace guards to stumble or complain. Between the garden and the divan was the royal viewing-pavilion, a low structure of rare satin-smooth woods upon which the Emir in better days would sit for hours, staring out at the barren sun-hammered sandy plain, the pale tormented sky, the occasional wandering camel or hyena, the gnarled scrubby bush that marked the path of the river, six or seven miles away. The cowrie-studded ebony scepter of high office was lying abandoned on the floor of the pavilion, as though nothing more than a cast-off toy.

Four curious figures stood now at the foot of the Emir's divan. One was the Tijani, a member of the city's chief fraternity of religious laymen. He was a man of marked Arab features, dressed in a long white robe over droopy yellow pantaloons, a red turban, a dozen or so strings of amber beads. Probably he was a well-to-do merchant or shopkeeper in daily life. He was wholly absorbed in his orisons, rocking back and forth in place, crooning indefatigably to his hundred-beaded rosary, working hard to efface the Emir's sins and make him fit for Paradise. His voice was thin as feathers from overuse, a low eroded murmur which scarcely halted even for breath. He acknowledged Little Father's arrival with the merest flick of an eyebrow, without pausing in his toil.

The other three holy men were marabouts, living saints, two black Songhay and a man of mixed blood. They were weighted down with leather packets of grigri charms hanging in thick mounds around their

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necks and girded by other charms by the dozen around their wrists and hips, and they had the proper crazy glittering saint-look in their eyes, the true holy baraka. It was said that saints could fly, could raise the dead, could make the rains come and the rivers rise. Little Father doubted all of that, but he was one who tended to keep his doubts to himself. In any case the city was full of such miracle-workers, dozens of them, and the tombs of hundreds more were objects of veneration in the poorer districts. Little Father recognized all three of these: he had seen them now and then hovering around the Sankore Mosque or sometimes the other and greater one at Dyingerey Ber, striking saint-poses on one leg or with arms outflung, muttering saint-gibberish, giving passersby the saint-stare. Now they stood lined up in grim silence before the Emir, making cryptic gestures with their fingers. Even before Big Father had fallen ill, these three had gone about declaring that he was doomed shortly to be taken by a vampire, as various recent omens indisputably proved—a flight of owls by day, a flight of vultures by night, the death of a sacred dove that lived on the minaret of the Great Mosque. For them to be in the palace at all was remarkable; for them to be in the presence of the king was astounding. Someone in the royal entourage must be at the point of desperation, Little Father concluded.

He knelt at the bedside.

"Father?"

The Emir's eyes were glassy. Perhaps he was becoming a saint too.

"Father, it's me. They said you were rallying. I know you're going to be all right soon."

Was that a smile? Was that any sort of reaction at all?

"Father, it'll be cooler in just a few weeks. The rains are already on the way. Everybody's saying so. You'll feel better when the rains come."

The old man's cheeks were like parchment. His bones were showing through. He was eighty years old and he had been Emir of Songhay for fifty of those years. Electricity hadn't even been invented when he became king, nor the motorcar. Even the railroad had been something new and startling.

There was a claw-like hand suddenly jutting out of the blankets. Little Father touched it. It was like touching a piece of worn leather. By the time the rains had reached Timbuctoo, Big Father would have made the trip by ceremonial barge to the old capital of Gao, two hundred miles down the Niger, to take his place in the royal cemetery of the Kings of Songhay.

Little Father went on murmuring encouragement for another few moments, but it was apparent that the Emir wasn't listening. A stray burst of breeze brought the sound of the marketplace music, growing

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louder now. Could he hear that? Could he hear anything? Did he care? After a time Little Father rose, and went quickly from the palace.

In the marketplace the dancing had already begun. They had shoved aside the booths of the basket-weavers and the barbers and the slipper-makers and the charm-peddlers, the dealers in salt and fruit and donkeys and rice and tobacco and meat, and a frenetic procession of dancers was weaving swiftly back and forth across the central square from the place of the milk vendors at the south end to the place of the wood vendors at the north when Little Father and Ali Pasha arrived.

"You see?" Ali Pasha asked. "The life dance. They bring the energy down from the skies to fill your father's veins."

There was tremendous energy in it, all right. The dancers pounded the sandy earth with their bare feet, they clapped their hands, they shouted quick sharp punctuations of wordless sound, they made butting gestures with their outflung elbows, they shook their heads convulsively and sent rivers of sweat flying through the air. The heat seemed to mean nothing to them. Their skins gleamed. Their eyes were bright as new coins. They made rhythmic grunting noises, oom oom oom, and the whole city seemed to shake beneath their tread.

To Little Father it looked more like the death dance than the dance of life. There was the frenzied stomp of mourning about it. But he was no expert on these things. The people had all sorts of beliefs that were mysteries to him, and which he hoped would melt away like snowflakes during his coming reign. Did they still put pressure on Allah to bring the rains by staking small children out in the blazing sun for days at a time outside the tombs of saints? Did they still practice alchemy on one another, turning wrapping paper into banknotes by means of spells? Did they continue to fret about vampires and djinn? It was all very embarrassing. Songhay was a modern state; and yet there was all this medieval nonsense still going on. Very likely the old Emir had liked it that way. But soon things would change.

The close formation of the dancers opened abruptly, and to his horror Little Father saw a group of foreigners standing in a little knot at the far side of the marketplace. He had only a glimpse of them; then the dance closed again and the foreigners were blocked from view. He touched Ali Pasha's arm.

"Did you see them?"

"Oh, yes. Yes!"

"Who are they, do you think?"

The vizier stared off intently toward the other side of the marketplace, as though his eyes were capable of seeing through the knot of dancers.

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"Embassy people, Little Father. Some Mexicans, I believe, and perhaps the Turks. And those fair-haired people must be the English."

Here to gape at the quaint tribal dances, enjoying the fine barbaric show in the extravagant alien heat.

"You said they were coming by barge. How'd they get here so fast?"

Ali Pasha shook his head.

"They must have taken the motorboat instead, I suppose."

"I can't receive them here, like this. I never would have come here if I had known that they'd be here."

"Of course not, Little Father."

"You should have told me!"

"I had no way of knowing," said Ali Pasha, and for once he sounded sincere, even distressed. "There will be punishments for this. But come, Little Father. Come: to your palace. As you say, they ought not find you here this way, without a retinue, without your regalia. This evening you can receive them properly."

Very likely the newly arrived diplomats at the upper end of the marketplace had no idea that they had been for a few moments in the presence of the heir to the throne, the future Emir of Songhay, one of the six or seven most powerful men in Africa. If they had noticed anyone at all across the way, they would simply have seen a slender, supple, just-barely-still-youngish man with Moorish features, wearing a simple white robe and a flat red skullcap, standing beside a tall, powerfully built black man clad in an ornately brocaded robe of purple and yellow. The black man might have seemed more important to them in the Timbuctoo scheme of things than the Moorish-looking one, though they would have been wrong about that.

But probably they hadn't been looking toward Little Father and Ali Pasha at all. Their attention was on the dancers. That was why they had halted here, en route from the river landing to their various embassies.

"How tireless they are!" Prince Itzcoatl said. The Mexican envoy, King Moctezuma's brother. "Why don't their bones melt in this heat?" He was a compact copper-colored man decked out grandly in an Aztec feather cape, golden anklets and wristlets, a gold headband studded with brilliant feathers, golden ear-plugs and nose-plugs. "You'd think they were glad their king is dying, seeing them jump around like that."

"Perhaps they are," observed the Turk, Ismet Akif.

He laughed in a mild, sad way. Everything about him seemed to be like that, mild and sad: his droopy-lidded melancholic eyes, his fleshy downcurved lips, his sloping shoulders, even the curiously stodgy and inappropriate European-style clothes that he had chosen to wear in this

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impossible climate, the dark heavy woolen suit, the narrow grey necktie. But wide cheekbones and a broad, authoritative forehead indicated his true strength to those with the ability to see such things. He too was of royal blood, Sultan Osman's third son. There was something about him that managed to be taut and slack both at once, no easy task. His posture, his expression, the tone of his voice, all conveyed the anomalous sense of self that came from being the official delegate of a vast empire which—as all the world knew—had passed the peak of its greatness some time back and was launched on a long irreversible decline. To the diminutive Englishman at his side he said, "How does it seem to you, Sir Anthony? Are they grieving or celebrating?"

Everyone in the group understood the great cost of the compliment Ismet Akif was paying by amiably addressing his question to the English ambassador, just as if they were equals. It was high courtesy: it was grace in defeat.

Turkey still ruled a domain spanning thousands of miles. England was an insignificant island kingdom. Worse yet, England had been a Turkish province from medieval times onward, until only sixty years before. The exasperated English, weary of hundreds of years of speaking Turkish and bowing to Mecca, finally had chased out their Ottoman masters in the first year of what by English reckoning was the twentieth century, thus becoming the first of all the European peoples to regain their independence. There were no Spaniards here today, no Italians, no Portuguese, and no reason why there should be, for their countries all still were Turkish provinces. Perhaps envoys from those lands would show up later to pay homage to the dead Emir, if only to make some pathetic display of tattered sovereignty; but it would not matter to anyone else, one way or the other. The English, though, were beginning once again to make their way in the world, a little tentatively but nevertheless visibly. And so Ismet Akif had had to accommodate himself to the presence of an English diplomat on the slow journey upriver from the coast to the Songhay capital, and everyone agreed he had managed it very well.

Sir Anthony said, "Both celebrating *and* grieving, I'd imagine." He was a precise, fastidious little man with icy blue eyes, an angular bony face, a tight cap of red curls beginning to shade now into gray. "The king is dead, long live the king—that sort of thing."

"*Almost* dead," Prince Itzcoatl reminded him.

"Quite. Terribly awkward, our getting here before the fact. Or *are* we here before the fact?" Sir Anthony glanced toward his young chargé-d'affaires. "Have you heard anything, Michael? Is the old Emir still alive, do you know?"

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Michael was long-legged, earnest, milky-skinned, very fair. In the merciless Timbuctoo sunlight his golden hair seemed almost white. The first blush of what was likely to be a very bad sunburn was spreading over his cheeks and forehead. He was twenty-four and this was his first notable diplomatic journey.

He indicated the flagpole at the eastern end of the plaza, where the black and red Songhay flag hung like a dead thing high overhead.

"They'd have lowered the flag if he'd died, Sir Anthony."

"Quite. Quite. They do that sort of thing here, do they?"

"I'd rather expect so, sir."

"And then what? The whole town plunged into mourning? Drums, chanting? The new Emir paraded in the streets? Everyone would head for the mosques, I suppose." Sir Anthony glanced at Ismet Akif. "We would too, eh? Well, I could stand to go into a mosque one more time, I suppose."

After the Conquest, when London had become New Istanbul, the worship of Allah had been imposed by law. Westminster Abbey had been turned into a mosque, and the high pashas of the occupation forces were buried in it alongside the Plantagenet kings. Later the Turks had built the great golden-domed Mosque of Ali on the Strand, opposite the Grand Palace of Sultan Mahmud. To this day perhaps half the English still embraced Islam, out of force of habit if nothing else, and Turkish was still heard in the streets nearly as much as English. The conquerors had had five hundred years to put their mark on England, and that could not be undone overnight. But Christianity was fashionable again among the English well-to-do, and had never really been relinquished by the poor, who had kept their underground chapels through the worst of the Islamic persecutions. And it was obligatory for the members of the governing class.

"It would have been better for us all," said Ismet Akif gravely, "if we had not had to set out so early that we would arrive here before the Emir's death. But of course the distances are so great, and travel is so very slow—"

"And the situation so explosive," Prince Itzcoatl said.

Unexpectedly Ismet Akif's bright-eyed daughter Selima, who was soft-spoken and delicate-looking and was not thought to be particularly forward, said, "Are you talking about the possibility that King Suleiyman of Mali might send an invasion force into Songhay when the old man finally dies?"

Everyone swung about to look at her. Someone gasped and someone else choked back shocked laughter. She was extremely young and of course she was female, but even so the remark was exceedingly tactless,

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exceedingly embarrassing. The girl had not come to Songhay in any official capacity, merely as her father's traveling companion, for he was a widower. The whole trip was purely an adventure for her. All the same, a diplomat's child should have had more sense. Ismet Akif turned his eyes inward and looked as though he would like to sink into the earth. But Selima's dark eyes glittered with something very much like mischief. She seemed to be enjoying herself. She stood her ground.

"No," she said. "We can't pretend it isn't likely. There's Mali, right next door, controlling the coast. It stands to reason that they'd like to have the inland territory too, and take total control of West African trade. King Suleiyman could argue that Songhay would be better off as part of Mali than it is this way, a landlocked country."

"My dear—"

"And the prince," she went on imperturbably, "is supposed to be just an idler, isn't he, a silly dissolute playboy who's spent so many years waiting around to become Emir that he's gone completely to ruin. Letting him take the throne would be a mistake for everybody. So this is the best possible time for Mali to move in and consolidate the two countries. You all see that. That's why we're here, aren't we, to stare the Malians down and keep them from trying it? Because they'd be too strong for the other powers' comfort if they got together with the Songhayans. And it's all too likely to happen. After all, Mali and Songhay have been consolidated before."

"Hundreds of years ago," said Michael gently. He gave her a great soft blue-eyed stare of admiration and despair. "The principle that the separation of Mali and Songhay is desirable and necessary has been understood internationally since—"

"Please," Ismet Akif said. "This is an unfortunate discussion. My dear, we ought not indulge in such speculations in a place of this sort, or anywhere else, let me say. Perhaps it's time to continue on to our lodgings, do you not all agree?"

"A good idea. The dancing is becoming a little repetitious," Prince Itzcoatl said.

"And the heat—" Sir Anthony said. "This unthinkable diabolical heat—"

They looked at each other. They shook their heads, and exchanged small smiles.

Prince Itzcoatl said quietly to Sir Anthony, "An unfortunate discussion, yes."

"Very unfortunate."

Then they all moved on, in groups of two and three, their porters trailing a short distance behind bowed under the great mounds of lug-

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gage. Michael stood for a moment or two peering after the retreating form of Selima Akif in an agony of longing and chagrin. Her movements seemed magical. They were as subtle as Oriental music: an exquisite semitonal slither, an enchanting harmonious twang.

The love he felt for her had surprised and mortified him when it had first blossomed on the riverboat as it came interminably up the Niger from the coast, and here in his first hour in Timbuctoo he felt it almost as a crucifixion. There was no worse damage he could do to himself than to fall in love with a Turk. For an Englishman it was virtual treason. His diplomatic career would be ruined before it had barely begun. He would be laughed out of court. He might just as well convert to Islam, paint his face brown, and undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. And live thereafter as an anchorite in some desert cave, imploring the favor of the Prophet.

"Michael?" Sir Anthony called. "Is anything wrong?"

"Coming, sir. Coming!"

The reception hall was long and dark and cavernous, lit only by wax tapers that emitted a smoky amber light and a peculiar odor, something like that of leaves decomposing on a forest floor. Along the walls were bowers of interwoven ostrich and peacock plumes, and great elephant tusks set on brass pedestals rose from the earthen floor like obelisks at seemingly random intervals. Songhayans who might have been servants or just as easily high officials of the court moved among the visiting diplomats bearing trays of cool lime-flavored drinks, musty wine, and little delicacies fashioned from a bittersweet red nut.

The prince, in whose name the invitations had gone forth, was nowhere in sight so far as any of the foreigners could tell. The apparent host of the reception was a burly jet-black man of regal bearing clad in a splendid tawny robe that might actually have been made of woven lionskins. He had introduced himself as Ali Pasha, vizier to the prince. The prince, he explained, was at his father's bedside, but would be there shortly. The prince was deeply devoted to his father, said Ali Pasha; he visited the failing Emir constantly.

"I saw that man in the marketplace this afternoon," Selima said. "He was wearing a purple and yellow robe then. Down at the far side, beyond the dancers, for just a moment. He was looking at us. I thought he was magnificent, somebody of great importance. And he is."

A little indignantly Michael said, "These blacks all look alike to me. How can you be sure that's the one you saw?"

"Because I'm sure. Do all Turks look alike to you too?"

"I didn't mean—"

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"All English look alike to us, you know. We can just about distinguish between the red-haired ones and the yellow-haired ones. And that's as far as it goes."

"You aren't serious, Selima."

"No. No, I'm not. I actually can tell one of you from another most of the time. At least I can tell the handsome ones from the ugly ones."

Michael flushed violently, so that his already sunburned face turned flaming scarlet and emanated great waves of heat. Everyone had been telling him how handsome he was since his boyhood. It was as if there was nothing to him at all except regularly formed features and pale flawless skin and long athletic limbs. The notion made him profoundly uncomfortable.

She laughed. "You should cover your face when you're out in the sun. You're starting to get cooked. Does it hurt very much?"

"Not at all. Can I get you a drink?"

"You know that alcohol is forbidden to—"

"The other kind, I mean. The green soda. It's very good, actually. Boy! Boy!"

"I'd rather have the nut thing," she said. She stretched forth one hand—her hand was very small, and the fingers were pale and perfect—and made the tiniest of languid gestures. Two of the black men with trays came toward her at once, and, laughing prettily, she scooped a couple of the nut-cakes from the nearer of the trays. She handed one to Michael, who fumbled it and let it fall. Calmly she gave him the other. He looked at it as though she handed him an asp.

"Are you afraid I've arranged to have you poisoned?" she asked. "Go on. Eat it! It's good! Oh, you're so absurd, Michael! But I do like you."

"We aren't supposed to like each other, you know," he said bleakly.

"I know that. We're enemies, aren't we?"

"Not any more, actually. Not officially."

"Yes, I know. The Empire recognized English independence a good many years ago."

The way she said it, it was like a slap. Michael's reddened cheeks blazed fiercely.

In anguish he crammed the nut-cake into his mouth with both hands.

She went on, "I can remember the time when I was a girl and King Richard came to Istanbul to sign the treaty with the Sultan. There was a parade."

"Yes. Yes. A great occasion."

"But there's still bad blood between the Empire and England. We haven't forgiven you for some of the things you did to our people in your country in Sultan Abdul's time, when we were evacuating."

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"*You* haven't forgiven *us*—?"

"When you burned the bazaar. When you bombed that mosque. The broken shop windows. We were going away voluntarily, you know. You were much more violent toward us than you had any right to be."

"You speak very directly, don't you?"

"There were atrocities. I studied them in school."

"And when you people conquered us in 1490? Were you gentle then?" For a moment Michael's eyes were hot with fury, the easily triggered anger of the good Englishman for the bestial Turk. Appalled, he tried to stem the rising surge of patriotic fervor before it ruined everything. He signaled frantically to one of the tray-wielders, as though another round of nut-cakes might serve to get the conversation into a less disagreeable track. "But never mind all that, Selima. We mustn't be quarreling over ancient history like this." Somehow he mastered himself, swallowing, breathing deeply, managing an earnest smile. "You say you like me."

"Yes. And you like me. I can tell."

"Is that all right?"

"Of course it is, silly. Although I shouldn't allow it. We don't even think of you English as completely civilized." Her eyes glowed. He began to tremble, and tried to conceal it from her. She was playing with him, he knew, playing a game whose rules she herself had defined and would not share with him. "Are you a Christian?" she asked.

"You know I am."

"Yes, you must be. You used the Christian date for the year of the conquest of England. But your ancestors were Moslem, right?"

"Outwardly, during the time of the occupation. Most of us were. But for all those centuries we secretly continued to maintain our faith in—" She was definitely going to get him going again. Already his head was beginning to pound. Her beauty was unnerving enough; but this roguishness was more than he could take. He wondered how old she was. Eighteen? Nineteen? No more than that, surely. Very likely she had a fiancé back in Istanbul, some swarthy mustachioed fez-wearing Ottoman princeling, with whom she indulged in unimaginable Oriental perversions and to whom she confessed every little flirtation she undertook while traveling with her father. It was humiliating to think of becoming an item of gossip in some perfumed boudoir on the banks of the Bosporus. A sigh escaped him. She gave him a startled look, as though he had mooed at her. Perhaps he had. Desperately he sought for something, anything, that would rescue him from this increasingly tortured moment of impossible intimacy; and, looking across the room, he was astounded to find his eyes suddenly locked on those of the heir apparent to the

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throne of Songhay. "Ah, there he is," Michael said in vast relief. "The prince has arrived."

"Which one? Where?"

"The slender man. The red velvet tunic."

"Oh. Oh, yes. *Him.* I saw him in the marketplace too, with Ali Pasha. Now I understand. They came to check us out before we knew who they were." Selima smiled disingenuously. "He's very attractive, isn't he? Rather like an Arab, I'd say. And not nearly as dissolute-looking as I was led to expect. Is it all right if I go over and say hello to him? Or should I wait for a proper diplomatic introduction? I'll ask my father, I think. Do you see him? Oh, yes, there he is over there, talking to Prince Itzcoatl—" She began to move away without a backward look.

Michael felt a sword probing in his vitals.

"Boy!" he called, and one of the blacks turned to him with a somber grin. "Some of that wine, if you please!"

On the far side of the room Little Father smiled and signaled for a drink also—not the miserable palm wine, which he abhorred and which as a good Moslem he should abjure anyway, but the clear fiery brandy that the caravans brought him from Tunis, and which to an outsider's eyes would appear to be mere water. His personal cupbearer, who served no one else in the room, poured until he nodded, and slipped back into the shadows to await the prince's next call.

In the first moments of his presence at the reception Little Father had taken in the entire scene, sorting and analyzing and comprehending. The Turkish ambassador's daughter was even more beautiful than Ali Pasha had led him to think, and there was an agreeable slyness about her that Little Father was able to detect even at a distance. Lust awoke in him at once and he allowed himself a little smile as he savored its familiar throbbing along the insides of his thighs. The Turkish girl was very fine. The tall fair-haired young man, probably some sort of subsidiary English official, was obviously and stupidly in love with her. He should be advised to keep out of the sun. The Aztec prince, all done up in feathers and gold, was arrogant and brutal and smart, as Aztecs usually were. The Turk, the girl's father, looked soft and effete and decadent, which he probably found to be a useful pose. The older Englishman, the little one with the red hair who most likely was the official envoy, seemed tough and dangerous. And over there was another one who hadn't been at the marketplace to see the dancing, the Russian, no doubt, a big man, strong and haughty, flat face and flat sea-green eyes and a dense little black beard through which a glint of gold teeth occasionally showed. He too seemed dangerous, physically dangerous, a man who might pick things up and smash them for amusement, but in him all the danger was on

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the outside, and with the little Englishman it was the other way around. Little Father wondered how much trouble these people would manage to create for him before the funeral was over and done with. It was every nation's ambition to create trouble in the empires of Africa, after all: there was too much cheap labor here, too much in the way of raw materials, for the pale jealous folk of the overseas lands to ignore, and they were forever dreaming dreams of conquest. But no one had ever managed it. Africa had kept itself independent of the great overseas powers. The Pasha of Egypt still held his place by the Nile, in the far south the Mambo of Zimbabwe maintained his domain amidst enough gold to make even an Aztec feel envy, and the Bey of Marrakesh was unchallenged in the north. And the strong western empires flourished as ever, Ghana, Mali, Kongo, Songhay—no, no, Africa had never let itself be eaten by Turks or Russians or even the Moors, though they had all given it a good try. Nor would it ever. Still, as he wandered among these outlanders Little Father felt contempt for him and his people drifting through the air about him like smoke. He wished that he could have made a properly royal entrance, coming upon the foreigners in style, with drums and trumpets and bugles. Preceded as he entered by musicians carrying gold and silver guitars, and followed by a hundred armed slaves. But those were royal prerogatives, and he was not yet Emir. Besides, this was a solemn time in Songhay, and such pomp was unbefitting. And the foreigners would very likely look upon it as the vulgarity of a barbarian, anyway, or the quaint grandiosity of a primitive.

Little Father downed his brandy in three quick gulps and held out the cup for more. It was beginning to restore his spirit. He felt a sense of deep well-being, of ease and assurance.

But just then came a stir and a hubbub at the north door of the reception hall. In amazement and fury he saw Serene Glory entering, Big Father's main wife, surrounded by her full retinue. Her hair was done up in the elaborate great curving horns of the scorpion style, and she wore astonishing festoons of jewelry, necklaces of gold and amber, bracelets of silver and ebony and beads, rings of stone, earrings of shining ivory.

To Ali Pasha the prince said, hissing, "What's *she* doing here?"

"You invited her yourself, Little Father."

Little Father stared into his cup.

"I did?"

"There is no question of that, sir."

"Yes. Yes, I did." Little Father shook his head. "I must have been drunk. What was I thinking of?" Big Father's main wife was young and beautiful, younger, indeed, than Little Father himself, and she was an immense annoyance. Big Father had had six wives in his time, or possibly

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seven—Little Father was not sure, and he had never dared to ask—of whom all of the earliest ones were now dead, including Little Father's own mother. Of the three that remained, one was an elderly woman who lived in retirement in Gao, and one was a mere child, the old man's final toy; and then there was this one, this witch, this vampire, who placed no bounds on her ambitions. Only six months before, when Big Father had still been more or less healthy, Serene Glory had dared to offer herself to Little Father as they returned together from the Great Mosque. Of course he desired her; who would not desire her? But the idea was monstrous. Little Father would no more lay a hand on one of Big Father's wives than he would lie down with a crocodile. Clearly this woman, suspecting that the father was approaching his end, had had some dream of beguiling the son. That would not happen. Once Big Father was safely interred in the royal cemetery Serene Glory would go into chaste retirement, however beautiful she might be.

"Get her out of here, fast!" Little Father whispered.

"But she has every right—she is the wife of the Emir—"

"Then keep her away from me, at least. If she comes within five feet of me tonight, you'll be tending camels tomorrow, do you hear? Within *ten* feet. See to it."

"She will come nowhere near you, Little Father."

There was an odd look on Ali Pasha's face.

"Why are you smiling?" Little Father asked.

"Smiling? I am not smiling, Little Father."

"No. No, of course not."

Little Father made a gesture of dismissal and walked toward the platform of audience. A reception line began to form. The Russian was the first to present his greetings to the prince, and then the Aztec, and then the Englishman. There were ceremonial exchanges of gifts. At last it was the turn of the Turk. He had brought a splendid set of ornate daggers, inlaid with jewels. Little Father received them politely and, as he had with the other ambassadors, he bestowed an elaborately carved segment of ivory tusk upon Ismet Akif. The girl stood shyly to one side.

"May I present also my daughter Selima," said Ismet Akif.

She was well trained. She made a quick little ceremonial bow, and as she straightened her eyes met Little Father's, only for a moment, and it was enough. Warmth traveled beneath his skin nearly the entire length of his body, a signal he knew well. He smiled at her. The smile was a communicative one, and was understood and reciprocated. Even in that busy room those smiles had the force of thunderclaps. Everyone had been watching. Quickly Little Father's gaze traversed the reception hall, and in a fraction of an instant he took in the sudden flicker of rage on the

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face of Serene Glory, the sudden knowing look on Ali Pasha's, the sudden anguished comprehension on that of the tall young Englishman. Only Ismet Akif remained impassive; and yet Little Father had little doubt that he too was in on the transaction. In the wars of love there are rarely any secrets amongst those on the field of combat.

Every day there was dancing in the marketplace. Some days the dancers kept their heads motionless and put everything else into motion; other days they let their heads oscillate like independent creatures, while scarcely moving a limb. There were days of shouting dances and days of silent dances. Sometimes brilliant robes were worn and sometimes the dancers were all but naked.

In the beginning the foreign ambassadors went regularly to watch the show. But as time went on and the Emir continued not to die, and the intensity of the heat grew and grew, going beyond the uncomfortable into the implausible and then beyond that to the unimaginable, they tended to stay within the relative coolness of their own compounds despite the temptations of the daily show in the plaza. New ambassadors arrived daily, from the Maori Confederation, from China, from Peru finally, from lesser lands like Korea and Ind and the Teutonic States, and for a time the newcomers went to see the dancing with the same eagerness as their predecessors. Then they too stopped attending.

The Emir's longevity was becoming an embarrassment. Weeks were going by and the daily bulletins were a monotonous succession of medical ups and downs, with no clear pattern. The special ambassadors, unexpectedly snared in an ungratifying city at a disagreeable time of year, could not leave, but were beginning to find it an agony to stay on. It was evident to everyone now that the news of Big Father's imminent demise had gone forth to the world in a vastly overanticipatory way.

"If only the old bastard would simply get up and step out on his balcony and tell us he's healthy again, and let us all go home," Sir Anthony said. "Or succumb at last, one or the other. But this suspension, this indefiniteness—"

"Perhaps the prince will grow weary of the waiting and have him smothered in a pillow," Prince Itzcoatl suggested.

The Englishman shook his head. "He'd have done that ten years ago, if he had it in him at all. The time's long past for him to murder his father."

They were on the covered terrace of the Mexican embassy. In the dreadful heat-stricken silence of the day the foreign dignitaries, as they awaited the intolerably deferred news of the Emir's death, moved in

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formal rotation from one embassy to another, making ceremonial calls in accordance with strict rules of seniority and precedence.

"His Excellency the Grand Duke Alexander Petrovitch," the Aztec major domo announced.

The foreign embassies were all in the same quarter of New Timbuctoo, along the grand boulevard known as The Street of All Nations. In the old days the foreigners had lived in the center of the Old Town, in fine houses in the best native style, palaces of stone and brick covered with mauve or orange clay. But Big Father had persuaded them one by one to move to the New City. It was undignified and uncomfortable, he insisted, for the representatives of the great overseas powers to live in mud houses with earthen floors.

Having all the foreigners' dwellings lined up in a row along a single street made it much simpler to keep watch over them, and, in case international difficulties should arise, it would be ever so much more easy to round them all up at once under the guise of "protecting" them. But Big Father had not taken into account that it was also very much easier for the foreigners to mingle with each other, which was not necessarily a good idea. It faciliated conspiracy as well as surveillance.

"We are discussing our impatience," Prince Itzcoatl told the Russian, who was the cousin of the Czar. "Sir Anthony is weary of Timbuctoo."

"Nor am I the only one," said the Englishman. "Did you hear that Maori ranting and raving yesterday at the Peruvian party? But what can we do? What can we do?"

"We could to Egypt go while we wait, perhaps," said the Grand Duke. "The Pyramids, the Sphinx, the temples of Karkak!"

"Karnak," Sir Anthony said. "But what if the old bugger dies while we're gone? We'd never get back in time for the funeral. What a black eye for us!"

"And how troublesome for our plans," said the Aztec.

"Mansa Suleiyman would never forgive us," said Sir Anthony.

"Mansa Suleiyman! Mansa Suleiyman!" Alexander Petrovich spat. "Let the black brigand do his own dirty work, then. Brothers, let us go to Egypt. If the Emir dies while we are away, will not the prince be removed whether or not we happen to be in attendance at the funeral?"

"Should we be speaking of this here?" Prince Itzcoatl asked, plucking in displeasure at his earplugs.

"Why not? There is no danger. These people are like children. They would never suspect—"

"Even so—"

But the Russian would not be deterred. Bull-like, he said, "It will all go well whether we are here or not. Believe me. It is all arranged, I

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remind you. So let us go to Egypt, then, before we bake to death. Before we choke on the sand that blows through these miserable streets."

"Egypt's not a great deal cooler than Songhay right now," Prince Itzcoatl pointed out. "And sand is not unknown there either."

The Grand Duke's massive shoulders moved in a ponderous shrugging gesture.

"To the south, then, to the Great Waterfalls. It is winter in that part of Africa, such winter as they have. Or to the Islands of the Canaries. Anywhere, anywhere at all, to escape from this Timbuctoo. I fry here. I sizzle here. I remind you that I am Russian, my friends. This is no climate for Russians."

Sir Anthony stared suspiciously into the sea-green eyes. "Are you the weak link in our little affair, my dear Duke Alexander? Have we made a mistake by asking you to join us?"

"Does it seem so to you? Am I untrustworthy, do you think?"

"The Emir could die at any moment. Probably will. Despite what's been happening, or not happening, it's clear that he can't last very much longer. The removal of the prince on the day of the funeral, as you have just observed, has been arranged. But how can we dare risk being elsewhere on that day? How can we even *think* of such a thing?" Sir Anthony's lean face grew florid; his tight mat of graying red hair began to rise and crackle with inner electricity; his chilly blue eyes became utterly arctic. "It is *essential* that in the moment of chaos that follows, the great-power triumvirate we represent—the troika, as you say—be on hand here to invite King Suleiyman of Mali to take charge of the country. I repeat, your excellency: *essential*. The time factor is critical. If we are off on holiday in Egypt, or anywhere else—if we are so much as a day too late getting back here—"

Prince Itzcoatl said, "I think the Grand Duke understands that point, Sir Anthony."

"Ah, but does he? Does he?"

"I think so." The Aztec drew in his breath sharply and let his gleaming obsidian eyes meet those of the Russian. "Certainly he sees that we're all in it too deep to back out, and that therefore he has to abide by the plan as drawn, however inconvenient he may find it personally."

The Grand Duke, sounding a little nettled, said, "We are traveling too swiftly here, I think. I tell you, I hate this filthy place, I hate its impossible heat, I hate its blowing sand, I hate its undying Emir, I hate its slippery lecherous prince. I hate the smell of the air, even. It is the smell of camel shit, the smell of old mud. But I am your partner in this undertaking to the end. I will not fail you, believe me." His great shoulders stirred like boulders rumbling down a slope. "The consolidation of Mali and Songhay

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would be displeasing to the Sultan, and therefore it is pleasing to the Czar. I will assist you in making it happen, knowing that such a consolidation has value for your own nations as well, which also is pleasing to my royal cousin. By the Russian Empire from the plan there will be no withdrawal. Of such a possibility let there be no more talk."

"Of holidays in Egypt let there be no more talk either," said Prince Itzcoatl. "Agreed? None of us likes being here, Duke Alexander. But here we have to stay, like it or not, until everything is brought to completion."

"Agreed. Agreed." The Russian snapped his fingers. "I did not come here to bicker. I have hospitality for you, waiting outside. Will you share vodka with me?" An attaché of the Russian Embassy entered, bearing a crystal beaker in a bowl of ice. "This arrived today, by the riverboat, and I have brought it to offer to my beloved friends of England and Mexico. Unfortunately of caviar there is none, though there should be. This heat! This heat! Caviar, in this heat—impossible!" The Grand Duke laughed. "To our great countries! To international amity! To a swift and peaceful end to the Emir's terrible sufferings! To your healths, gentlemen! To your healths!"

"To Mansa Suleiyman, King of Mali and Songhay," Prince Itzcoatl said.

"Mansa Suleiyman, yes."

"Mansa Suleiyman!"

"What splendid stuff," said Sir Anthony. He held forth his glass, and the Russian attaché filled it yet again. "There are other and perhaps more deserving monarchs to toast. To His Majesty King Richard the Fifth!"

"King Richard, yes!"

"And His Imperial Majesty Vladimir the Ninth!"

"Czar Vladimir! Czar Vladimir!"

"Let us not overlook His Highness Moctezuma the Twelfth!"

"King Moctezuma! King Moctezuma!"

"Shall we drink to cooler weather and happier days, gentlemen?"

"Cooler weather! Happier days! —And the Emir of Songhay, may he soon rest in peace at last!"

"And to his eldest son, the prince of the realm. May he also soon be at rest," said Prince Itzcoatl.

Selima said, "I hear you have vampires here, and djinn. I want to know all about them."

Little Father was aghast. She would say anything, anything at all.

"Who's been feeding you nonsense like that? There aren't any vampires. There aren't any djinni either. Those things are purely mythical."

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"There's a tree south of the city where vampires hold meetings at midnight to choose their victims. Isn't that so? The tree is half white and half red. When you first become a vampire you have to bring one of your male cousins to the meeting for the others to feast on."

"Some of the common people may believe such stuff. But do you think *I* do? Do you think we're all a bunch of ignorant savages here, girl?"

"There's a charm that can be worn to keep vampires from creeping into your bedroom at night and sucking your blood. I want you to get me one."

"I tell you, there aren't any vamp—"

"Or, there's a special prayer you can say. And while you say it you spit in four directions, and that traps the vampire in your house so he can be arrested. Tell me what it is. And the charm for making the vampire give back the blood he's drunk. I want to know that, too."

They were on the private upstairs porch of Little Father's palace. The night was bright with moonlight, and the air was as hot as wet velvet. Selima was wearing a long silken robe, very sheer. He could see the shadow of her breasts through it when she turned at an angle to the moon.

"Are you always like this?" he asked, beginning to feel a little irritable. "Or are you just trying to torment me?"

"What's the point of traveling if you don't bother to learn anything about local customs?"

"You *do* think we're savages."

"Maybe I do. Africa is the dark continent. Black skins, black souls."

"My skin isn't black. It's practically as light as yours. But even if it were—"

"You're black *inside*. Your blood is African blood, and Africa is the strangest place in the world. The fierce animals you have, gorillas and hippos running around everywhere, giraffes, tigers—the masks, the nightmare carvings—the witchcraft, the drums, the chanting of the high priests—"

"Please," Little Father said. "You're starting to drive me crazy. I'm not responsible for what goes on in the jungle of the tropics. This is Songhay. Do we seem uncivilized to you? We were a great empire when you Ottomans were still herding goats on the steppes. The only giraffe you'll see in this city is the stuffed one in my father's throne room. There aren't any gorillas in Songhay, and tigers come from Asia, and if you see a hippo running, here or anywhere, please tell the newspaper right away." Then he began to laugh. "Look, Selima, this is a modern country. We have motorcars here. We have a stock exchange. There's a famous uni-

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versity in Timbuctoo, six hundred years old. I don't bow down to tribal idols. We are an Islamic people, you know."

It was lunacy to have let her force him onto the defensive like this. But she wouldn't stop her attack.

"Djinn are Islamic. The Koran talks about them. The Arabs believe in djinn."

Little Father struggled for patience.

"Perhaps they did five hundred years ago, but what's that to us? In any case we aren't Arabs."

"But there are djinn here, plenty of them. My head porter told me. A djinn will appear as a small black spot on the ground and will grow until he's as big as a house. He might change into a sheep or a dog or a cat, and then he'll disappear. The porter said that one time he was at the edge of town in Kabara, and he was surrounded by giants in white turbans that made a weird sucking noise at him."

"What is this man's name? He has no right filling your head with this trash. I'll have him fed to the lions."

"Really?" Her eyes were sparkling. "Would you? What lions? Where?"

"My father keeps them as pets, in a pit. No one is looking after them these days. They must be getting very hungry."

"Oh, you *are* a savage! You are!"

Little Father grinned lopsidedly. He was regaining some of the advantage, he felt. "Lions need to be fed now and then. There's nothing savage about that. *Not* feeding them, that would be savage."

"But to feed a servant to them—"

"If he speaks idiotic nonsense to a visitor, yes. Especially when the visitor is an impressionable young girl."

Her eyes flashed quick lightning, sudden pique. "You think I'm impressionable? You think I'm silly?"

"I think you are young."

"And I think you're a savage underneath it all. Even savages can start a stock exchange. But they're still savages."

"Very well," Little Father said, putting an ominous throb into his tone. "I admit it. I am the child of darkness. I am the pagan prince." He pointed to the moon, full and swollen, hanging just above them like a plummeting polished shield. "You think that is a dead planet up there? It is alive, it is a land of djinn. And it must be nourished. So when it is full like this, the king of this land must appear beneath its face and make offerings of energy to it."

"Energy?"

"Sexual energy," he said portentously. "Atop the great phallic altar, beneath which we keep the dried umbilicus of each of our dead kings.

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First there is a procession, the phallic figures carried through the streets. And then—"

"The sacrifice of a virgin?" Selima asked.

"What's wrong with you? We are good Moslems here. We don't countenance murder."

"But you countenance phallic rites at the full moon?"

He couldn't tell whether she was taking him seriously or not.

"We maintain certain pre-Islamic customs," he said. "It is folly to cut oneself off from one's origins."

"Absolutely. Tell me what you do on the night the moon is full."

"First, the king coats his entire body in rancid butter—"

"I don't think I like that!"

"Then the chosen bride of the moon is led forth—"

"The fair-skinned bride."

"Fair-skinned?" he said. She saw it was a game, he realized. She was getting into it. "Why fair-skinned?"

"Because she'd be more like the moon than a black woman would. Her energy would rise into the sky more easily. So each month a white woman is stolen and brought to the king to take part in the rite."

Little Father gave her a curious stare. "What a ferocious child you are!"

"I'm not a child. You do prefer white women, don't you? One thing you regret is that I'm not white enough for you."

"You seem very white to me," said Little Father. She was at the edge of the porch now, looking outward over the sleeping city. Idly he watched her shoulderblades moving beneath her sheer gown. Then suddenly the garment began to slide downward, and he realized she had unfastened it at the throat and cast it off. She had worn nothing underneath it. Her waist was very narrow, her hips broad, her buttocks smooth and full, with a pair of deep dimples at the place where they curved outward from her back. His lips were beginning to feel very dry, and he licked them thoughtfully.

She said, "What you really want is an Englishwoman, with skin like milk, and pink nipples, and golden hair down below."

Damn Ali Pasha! Was he out of his mind, telling such stuff to her? He'd go to the lions first thing tomorrow!

Amazed, he cried, "What are you talking about? What sort of madness is this?"

"That is what you want, isn't it? A nice juicy golden-haired one. All of you Africans secretly want one. Some of you not so secretly. I know all about it."

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No, it was inconceivable. Ali Pasha was tricky, but he wasn't insane. This was mere coincidence.

"Have you ever had an Englishwoman, prince? A true pink and gold one?"

Little Father let out a sigh of relief. It was only another of her games, then. The girl was all mischief, and it came bubbling out randomly, spontaneously. Truly, she would say anything to anyone. Anything.

"Once," he said, a little vindictively. "She was writing a book on the African empires and she came here to do some research at our university. Our simple barbaric university. One night she interviewed me, on this very porch, a night almost as warm as this one. Her name was— ah— Elizabeth. Elizabeth, yes." Little Father's gaze continued to rest on Selima's bare back. She seemed much more frail above the waist than below. Below the waist she was solid, splendidly fleshly, a commanding woman, no girl at all. Languidly he said, "Skin like milk, indeed. And rosy nipples. I had never even imagined that nipples could be like that. And her hair—"

Selima turned to face him. "My nipples are dark."

"Yes, of course. You're a Turk. But Elizabeth—"

"I don't want to hear any more about Elizabeth. Kiss me."

Her nipples *were* dark, yes, and very small, almost like a boy's, tiny dusky targets on the roundness of her breasts. Her thighs were surprisingly full. She looked far more voluptuous naked than when she was clothed. He hadn't expected that. The heavy thatch at the base of her belly was jet black.

He said, "We don't care for kissing in Songhay. It's one of our quaint tribal taboos. The mouth is for eating, not for making love."

"Every part of the body is for making love. Kiss me."

"You Europeans!"

"I'm not European. I'm a Turk. You do it in some peculiar way here, don't you? Side by side. Back to back."

"No," he said. "Not back to back. Never like that, not even when we feel like reverting to tribal barbarism."

Her perfume drifted toward him, falling over him like a veil. Little Father went to her and she rose up out of the night to him, and they laughed. He kissed her. It was a lie, the thing he had told her, that Songhayans did not like to kiss. Songhayans liked to do everything: at least this Songhayan did. She slipped downward to the swirl of silken pillows on the floor, and he joined her there and covered her body with his own. As he embraced her he felt the moonlight on his back like the touch of a goddess' fingertips, cool, delicate, terrifying.

* * *

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On the horizon a sharp dawn-line of pale lavender appeared, cutting between the curving grayness above and the flat grayness below. It was like a preliminary announcement by the oboes or the French horns, soon to be transformed into the full overwhelming trumpetblast of morning. Michael, who had been wandering through Old Timbuctoo all night, stared eastward uneasily as if he expected the sky to burst into flame when the sun came into view.

Sleep had been impossible. Only his face and hands were actually sunburned, but his whole body throbbed with discomfort, as though the African sun had reached him even through his clothing. He felt the glow of it behind his knees, in the small of his back, on the soles of his feet.

Nor was there any way to escape the heat, even when the terrible glaring sun had left the sky. The nights were as warm as the days. The motionless air lay on you like burning fur. When you drew a breath you could trace its path all the way down, past your nostrils, past your throat, a trickle of molten lead descending the forking paths into your lungs and spreading out to weigh upon every individual air-sac inside you. Now and then came a breeze, but it only made things worse: it gave you no more comfort than a shower of hot ashes might have afforded. So Michael had risen after a few hours of tossing and turning and gone out unnoticed to wander under the weird and cheerless brilliance of the overhanging moon, down from the posh Embassy district into the Old Town somehow, and then from street to street, from quarter to quarter, no destination in mind, no purpose, seeking only to obliterate the gloom and misery of the night.

He was lost, of course—the Old Town was complex enough to negotiate in daylight, impossible in the dark—but that didn't matter. He was somewhere on the western side of town, that was all he knew. The moon was long gone from the sky, as if it had been devoured, though he had not noticed it setting. Before him the ancient metropolis of mud walls and low square flat-roofed buildings lay humped in the thinning darkness, a gigantic weary beast slowly beginning to stir. The thing was to keep on walking, through the night and into the dawn, distracting himself from the physical discomfort and the other, deeper agony that had wrapped itself like some voracious starfish around his soul.

By the faint light he saw that he had reached a sort of large pond. Its water looked to be a flat metallic green. Around its perimeter crouched a shadowy horde of water-carriers, crouching to scoop the green water into goatskin bags, spooning it in with gourds. Then they straightened, with the full bags—they must have weighed a hundred pounds—balanced on their heads, and went jogging off into the dawn to deliver their merchandise at the homes of the wealthy. Little ragged girls were there, too,

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seven or eight years old, filling jugs and tins to bring to their mothers. Some of them waded right into the pool to get what they wanted. A glowering black man in the uniform of the Emirate sat to one side, jotting down notations on a sheet of yellow paper. So this was probably the Old Town's municipal reservoir. Michael shuddered and turned away, back into the city proper. Into the labyrinth once more.

A gray, sandy light was in the sky now. It showed him narrow dusty thoroughfares, blind walls, curving alleyways leading into dark cul-de-sacs. Entire rows of houses seemed to be crumbling away, though they were obviously still inhabited. Underfoot everything was sand, making a treacherous footing. In places the entrances to buildings were half choked by the drifts. Camels, donkeys, horses wandered about on their own. The city's mixed population—veiled Tuaregs, black Sudanese, aloof and lofty Moors, heavy-bearded Syrian traders, the whole West African racial goulash—was coming forth into the day. Who were all these people? Tailors, moneylenders, scribes, camel-breeders, masons, charm-sellers, weavers, bakers—necromancers, sages, warlocks, perhaps a few vampires on their way home from their night's toil—Michael looked around, bewildered, trapped within his skull by the barriers of language and his own disordered mental state. He felt as though he were moving about under the surface of the sea, in a medium where he did not belong and could neither breathe nor think.

"Selima?" he said suddenly, blinking in astonishment.

His voice was voiceless. His lips moved, but no sound had come forth.

Apparition? Hallucination? No, no, she was really there. Selima glowed just across the way like a second sun suddenly rising over the city.

Michael shrank back against an immense buttress of mud brick. She had stepped out of a doorway in a smooth gray wall that surrounded what appeared to be one of the palaces of the nobility. The building, partly visible above the wall, was coated in orange clay and had elaborate Moorish windows of dark wood. He trembled. The girl wore only a flimsy white gown, so thin that he could make out the dark-tipped spheres of her breasts moving beneath it, and the dark triangle at her thighs. He wanted to cry. Had she no shame? No. No. She was indifferent to the display, and to everything around her; she would have walked completely naked through this little plaza just as casually as she strode through in this one thin garment.

"Selima, where have you spent this night? Whose palace is this?"

His words were air. No one heard them. She moved serenely onward. A motorcar appeared from somewhere, one of the five or six that Michael had seen so far in this city. A black plume of smoke rose from the vent of its coal-burning engine, and its two huge rear wheels slipped and slid

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about on the sandy track. Selima jumped up onto the open seat behind the driver, and with great booming exhalations the vehicle made its way through an arched passageway and disappeared into the maze of the town.

An embassy car, no doubt. Waiting here for her all night?

His soul ached. He had never felt so young, so foolish, so vulnerable, so wounded.

"Effendi?" a voice asked. "You wish a camel, effendi?"

"Thank you, no."

"Nice hotel? Bath? Woman to massage you? Boy to massage you?"

"Please. No."

"Some charms, maybe? Good grigri. Souvenir of Timbuctoo."

Michael groaned. He turned away and looked back at the house of infamy from which Selima had emerged.

"That building—what is it?"

"That? Is palace of Little Father. And look, look there, effendi—Little Father himself coming out for a walk."

The prince himself, yes. Of course. Who else would she have spent the night with, here in the Old Town? Michael was engulfed by loathing and despair. Instantly a swarm of eager citizens had surrounded the prince, clustering about him to beg favors the moment he showed himself. But he seemed to move through them with the sort of divine indifference that Selima, in her all-but-nakedness, had displayed. He appeared to be enclosed in an impenetrable bubble of self-concern. He was frowning, he looked troubled, not at all like a man who had just known the favors of the most desirable woman in five hundred miles. His lean sharp-angled face, which had been so animated at the official reception, now had a curiously stunned, immobile look about it, as though he had been struck on the head from behind a short while before and the impact was gradually sinking in.

Michael flattened himself against the buttress. He could not bear the thought of being seen by the prince now, here, as if he had been haunting the palace all night, spying on Selima. He put his arm across his face in a frantic attempt to hide himself, he whose western clothes and long legs and white skin made him stand out like a meteor. But the prince wasn't coming toward him. Nodding in an abstracted way, he turned quickly, passed through the throng of chattering petitioners as if they were ghosts, disappeared in a flurry of white fabric.

Michael looked about for his sudden friend, the man who had wanted to sell him camels, massages, souvenirs. What he wanted now was a guide to get him out of the Old Town and back to the residence of the English ambassador. But the man was gone.

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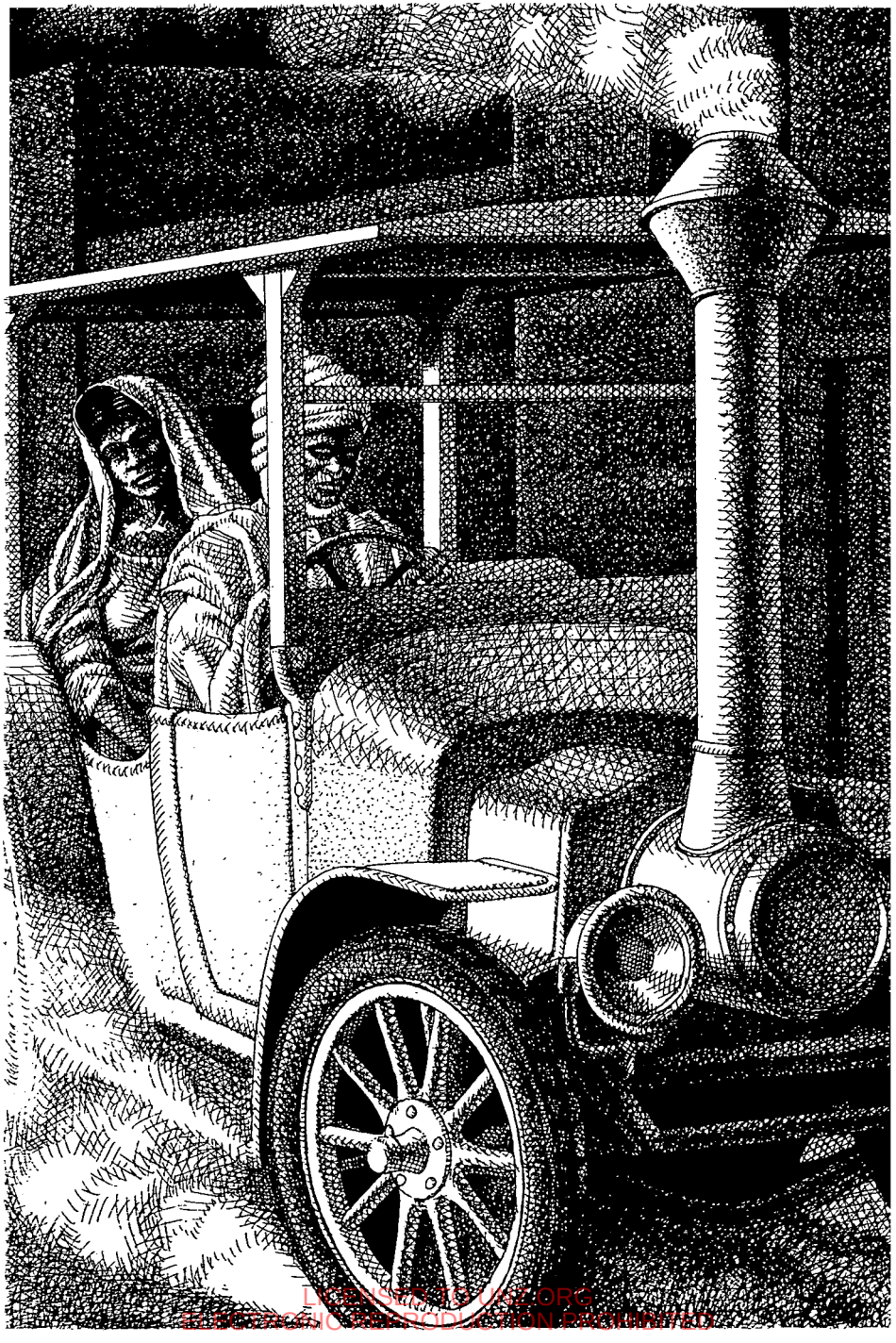

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"Pardon me—" Michael said to someone who looked almost like the first one. Then he realized that he had spoken in English. Useless. He tried in Turkish and in Arabic. A few people stared at him. They seemed to be laughing. He felt transparent to them. They could see his sorrow, his heartache, his anguish, as easily as his sunburn.

Like the good young diplomat he was, he had learned a little Songhay, too, the indigenous language. "Town talk," they called it. But the few words he had seemed all to have fled. He stood alone and helpless in the plaza, scuffing angrily at the sand, as the sun broke above the mud rooftops like the sword of an avenging angel and the full blast of morning struck him. Michael felt blisters starting to rise on his cheeks. Agitated flies began to buzz around his eyes. A camel, passing by just then, dropped half a dozen hot green turds right at his feet. He snatched one out of the sand and hurled it with all his strength at the bland blank mud-colored wall of Little Father's palace.

Big Father was sitting up on his divan. His silken blankets were knotted around his waist in chaotic strands, and his bare torso rose above the chaos, gleaming as though it had been oiled. His arms were like sticks and his skin was three shades paler than it once had been and cascades of loose flesh hung like wattles from his neck, but there was the brilliance of black diamonds in his glittering little eyes.

"Not dead yet, you see? You see?" His voice was a cracked wailing screech, but the old authoritative thunder was still somewhere behind it. "Back from the edge of the grave, boy! Allah walks with me yet!"

Little Father was numb with chagrin. All the joy of his night with Selima had vanished in a moment when word had arrived of his father's miraculous recovery. He had just been getting accustomed to the idea that he soon would be king, too. His first misgivings about the work involved in it had begun to ebb; he rather liked the idea of ruling, now. The crown was descending on him like a splendid gift. And here was Big Father sitting up, grinning, waving his arms around in manic glee. Taking back his gift. Deciding to live after all.

What about the funeral plans? What about the special ambassadors who had traveled so far, in such discomfort, to pay homage to the late venerable Emir of Songhay and strike their various deals with his successor?

Big Father had had his head freshly shaved and his beard had been trimmed. He looked like a gnome, ablaze with demonic energies. Off in the corner of the porch, next to the potted trees, the three marabouts stood in a circle, making sacred gestures at each other with lunatic vigor, each seeking to demonstrate superior fervor.

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Hoarsely Little Father said, "Your majesty, the news astonishes and delights me. When the messenger came, telling of your miraculous recovery, I leaped from my bed and gave thanks to the All-Merciful in a voice so loud you must have heard it here."

"Was there a woman with you, boy?"

"Father—"

"I hope you bathed before you came here. You come forth without bathing after you've lain with a woman and the djinn will make you die an awful death, do you realize that?"

"Father, I wouldn't think of—"

"Frothing at the mouth, falling down in the street, that's what'll happen to you. Who was she? Some nobleman's wife as usual, I suppose. Well, never mind. As long as she wasn't mine. Come closer to me, boy."

"Father, you shouldn't tire yourself by talking so much."

"Closer!"

A wizened claw reached for him. Little Father approached and the claw seized him. There was frightening strength in the old man still.

Big Father said, "I'll be up and around in two days. I want the Great Mosque made ready for the ceremony of thanksgiving. And I'll sacrifice to all the prophets and saints." A fit of coughing overcame him for a space, and he pounded his fist furiously against the side of the divan. When he spoke again, his voice seemed weaker, but still determined. "There was a vampire upon me, boy! Each night she came in here and drank from me."

"She?"

"With dark hair and pale foreign skin, and eyes that eat you alive. Every night. Stood above me, and laughed, and took my blood. But she's gone now. These three have imprisoned her and carried her off to the Eleventh Hell." He gestured toward the marabouts. "My saints. My heroes. I want them rewarded beyond all reckoning."

"As you say, father, so will I do."

The old man nodded. "You were getting my funeral ready, weren't you?"

"The prognosis was very dark. Certain preparations seemed advisable when we heard—"

"Cancel them!"

"Of course." Then, uncertainly: "Father, special envoys have come from many lands. The Czar's cousin is here, and the brother of Moctezuma, and a son of the late Sultan, and also—"

"I'll hold an audience for them all," said Big Father in great satisfaction. "They'll have gifts beyond anything they can imagine. Instead of a funeral, boy, we'll have a jubilee! A celebration of life. Moctezuma's

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brother, you say? And who did the Inca send?" Big Father laughed raucously. "All of them clustering around to see me put away underground!" He jabbed a finger against Little Father's breast. It felt like a spear of bone. "And in Mali they're dancing in the streets, aren't they? Can't contain themselves for glee. But they'll dance a different dance now." Big Father's eyes grew somber. "You know, boy, when I really do die, whenever that is, they'll try to take you out too, and Mali will invade us. Guard yourself. Guard the nation. Those bastards on the coast hunger to control our caravan routes. They're probably already scheming now with the foreigners to swallow us the instant I'm gone, but you mustn't allow them to—ah—ah—"

"Father?"

Abruptly the Emir's shriveled face crumpled in a frenzy of coughing. He hammered against his thighs with clenched fists. An attendant came running, bearing a beaker of water, and Big Father drank until he had drained it all. Then he tossed the beaker aside as though it were nothing. He was shivering. He looked glassy-eyed and confused. His shoulders slumped, his whole posture slackened. Perhaps his "recovery" had been merely the sudden final upsurge of a dying fire.

"You should rest, majesty," said a new voice from the doorway to the porch. It was Serene Glory's ringing contralto. "You overtax yourself, I think, in the first hours of this miracle."

Big Father's main wife had arrived, entourage and all. In the warmth of the morning she had outfitted herself in a startling robe of purple satin, over which she wore the finest jewels of the kingdom. Little Father remembered that his own mother had worn some of those necklaces and bracelets.

He was unmoved by Serene Glory's beauty, impressive though it was. How could Serene Glory matter to him with the memory, scarcely two hours old, of Selima's full breasts and agile thighs still glistening in his mind? But he could not fail to detect Serene Glory's anger. It surrounded her like a radiant aura. Tension sparkled in her kohl-bedecked eyes.

Perhaps she was still smoldering over Little Father's deft rejection of her advances as they were riding side by side back from the Great Mosque that day six months earlier. Or perhaps it was Big Father's unexpected return from the brink that annoyed her. Anyone with half a mind realized that Serene Glory dreamed of putting her own insipid brother on the throne in Little Father's place the moment the old Emir was gone, and thus maintaining and even extending her position at the summit of power. Quite likely she, like Little Father, had by now grown accustomed to the idea of Big Father's death and was having difficulty accepting the news that it would be somewhat postponed.

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To Little Father she said, "Our prayers have been answered, all glory to Allah! But you mustn't put a strain on the Emir's energies in this time of recovery. Perhaps you ought to go."

"I was summoned, lady."

"Of course. Quite rightly. And now you should go to the mosque and give thanks for what has been granted us all."

Her gaze was imperious and unanswerable. In one sentence Serene Glory had demoted him from imminent king to wastrel prince once again. He admired her gall. She was three years younger than Little Father, and here she was ordering him out of the royal presence as though he were a child. But of course she had had practice at ordering people around: her father was one of the greatest landlords of the eastern province. She had moved amidst power all her life, albeit power of a provincial sort. Little Father wondered how many noblemen of that province had spent time between the legs of Serene Glory before she had ascended to her present high position.

He said, "If my royal father grants me leave to go—"

The Emir was coughing again. He looked terrible.

Serene Glory went to him and bent close over him, so the old man could smell the fragrance rising from her breasts, and instantly Big Father relaxed. The coughing ceased and he sat up again, almost as vigorous as before. Little Father admired that maneuver too. Serene Glory was a worthy adversary. Probably her people were already spreading the word in the city that it was the power of her love for the Emir, and not the prayers of the three saints, that had brought him back from the edge of death.

"How cool it is in here," Big Father said. "The wind is rising. Will it rain today? The rains are due, aren't they? Let me see the sky. What color is the sky?" He looked upward in an odd straining way, as though the sky had risen to such a height that it could no longer be seen.

"Father," Little Father said softly.

The old man glared. "You heard her, didn't you? To the mosque! To the mosque and give thanks! Do you want Allah to think you're an ingrate, boy?" He started coughing once again. Once again he began visibly to descend the curve of his precarious vitality. His withered cheeks began to grow mottled. There was a feeling of impending death in the air.

Servants and ministers and the three marabouts gathered by his side, alarmed.

"Big Father! Big Father!"

And then once more he was all right again, just as abruptly. He gestured fiercely, an unmistakable dismissal. The woman in purple gave

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Little Father a dark grin of triumph. Little Father nodded to her gallantly: this round was hers. He knelt at the Emir's side, kissed his royal ring. It slipped about loosely on his shrunken finger. Little Father, thinking of nothing but the pressure of Selima's dark, hard little nipples against the palms of his hands two hours before, made the prostration of filial devotion to his father and, with ferocious irony, to his stepmother, and backed quickly away from the royal presence.

Michael said, distraught, "I couldn't sleep, sir. I went out for a walk."

"And you walked *the whole night long?*" Sir Anthony asked, in a voice like a flail.

"I didn't really notice the time. I just kept walking, and by and by the sun came up and I realized that the night was gone."

"It's your mind that's gone, I think." Sir Anthony, crooking his neck upward to Michael's much greater height, gave him a whip-crack glare. "What kind of calf are you, anyway? Haven't you any sense at all?"

"Sir Anthony, I don't underst—"

"Are you in *love*? With the Turkish girl?"

Michael clapped his hand over his mouth in dismay.

"You know about that?" he said lamely, after a moment.

"One doesn't have to be a mind-reader to see it, lad. Every camel in Timbuctoo knows it. The pathetic look on your face whenever she comes within fifty feet of you—the clownish way you shuffle your feet around, and hang your head—those occasional little groans of deepest melancholy—" The envoy glowered. He made no attempt to hide his anger, or his contempt. "By heaven, *I'd* like to hang your head, and all the rest of you as well. Have you no sense? Have you no sense whatsoever?"

Everything was lost, so what did anything matter? Defiantly Michael said, "Have you never fallen unexpectedly in love, Sir Anthony?"

"With a *Turk?*"

"Unexpectedly, I said. These things don't necessarily happen with one's political convenience in mind."

"And she reciprocates your love, I suppose? That's why you were out walking like a moon-calf in this miserable parched mudhole of a city all night long?"

"She spent the night with the crown prince," Michael blurted in misery.

"Ah. Ah, now it comes out!" Sir Anthony was silent for a while. Then he glanced up sharply, his eyes bright with skepticism. "But how do you know that?"

"I saw her leaving his palace at dawn, sir."

"Spying on her, were you?"

"I just happened to be there. I didn't even know it was his palace, until

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I asked. He came out himself a few minutes later, and went quickly off somewhere. He looked very troubled."

"He should have looked troubled. He'd just found out that he might not get to be king as quickly as he'd like to be."

"I don't understand, please, sir."

"There's word going around town this morning that the Emir has recovered. And had sent for his son to let him know that he wasn't quite as moribund as was generally believed."

Michael recoiled in surprise.

"Recovered? Is it true?"

Sir Anthony offered him a benign, patronizing smile.

"So they say. But the Emir's doctors assure us that it's nothing more than a brief rally in an inevitable descent. The old wolf will be dead within the week. Still, it's rather a setback for Little Father's immediate plans. The news of the Emir's unanticipated awakening from his coma must rather have spoiled his morning for him."

"Good," said Michael vindictively.

Sir Anthony laughed.

"You hate him, do you?"

"I despise him. I loathe him. I have nothing but the greatest detestation for him. He's a cynical amoral voluptuary and nothing more. He doesn't deserve to be a king."

"Well, if it's any comfort to you, lad, he's not going to live long enough to become one."

"What?"

"His untimely demise has been arranged. His stepmother is going to poison him at the funeral of the old Emir, if the old Emir ever has the good grace to finish dying."

"What? What?"

Sir Anthony smiled.

"This is quite confidential, you understand. Perhaps I shouldn't be entrusting you with it just yet. But you'd have needed to find out sooner or later. We've organized a little coup d'etat."

"What? What? What?" said Michael helplessly.

"Her Highness the Lady Serene Glory would like to put her brother on the throne instead of the prince. The brother is worthless, of course. So is the prince, of course, but at least he does happen to be the rightful heir. We don't want to see either of them have it, actually. What we'd prefer is to have the Mansa of Mali declare that the unstable conditions in Songhay following the death of the old Emir have created a danger to the security of all of West Africa that can be put to rest only by an amalgamation of the kingdoms of Mali and Songhay under a single ruler.

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Who would be, of course, the Mansa of Mali, precisely as your young lady so baldly suggested the other day. And that is what we intend to achieve. The Grand Duke and Prince Itzcoatl and I. As representatives of the powers whom we serve."

Michael stared. He rubbed his cheeks as if to assure himself that this was no dream. He found himself unable to utter a sound.

Sir Anthony went on, clearly and calmly.

"And so Serene Glory gives Little Father the deadly cup, and then the Mansa's troops cross the border, and we, on behalf of our governments, immediately recognize the new combined government. Which makes everyone happy except, I suppose, the Sultan, who has such good trade relationships with Songhay and is on such poor terms with the Mansa of Mali. But we hardly shed tears for the Sultan's distress, do we, boy? Do we? The distress of the Turks is no concern of ours. Quite the contrary, in fact, is that not so?" Sir Anthony clapped his hand to Michael's shoulder. It was an obvious strain for him, reaching so high. The fingers clamping into Michael's tender sunburned skin were agony. "So let's see no more mooning over this alluring Ottoman goddess of yours, eh, lad? It's inappropriate for a lovely blond English boy like yourself to be lusting after a Turk, as you know very well. She's nothing but a little slut, however she may seem to your infatuated eyes. And you needn't take the trouble to expend any energy loathing the prince, either. His days are numbered. He won't survive his evil old father by so much as a week. It's all arranged."

Michael's jaw gaped. A glazed look of disbelief appeared in his eyes. His face was burning fiercely, not from the sunburn now, but from the intensity of his confusion.

"But sir—sir—"

"Get yourself some sleep, boy."

"Sir!"

"Shocked, are you? Well, you shouldn't be. There's nothing shocking about assassinating an inconvenient king. What's shocking to me is a grown man with pure English blood in his veins spending the night creeping pitifully around after his dissolute little Turkish inamorata as she makes her way to the bed of her African lover. And then telling me how heartsore and miserable he is. Get yourself some sleep, boy. Get yourself some sleep!"

In the midst of the uncertainty over the Emir's impending death the semi-annual salt caravan from the north arrived in Timbuctoo. It was a great, if somewhat unexpected, spectacle, and all the foreign ambas-

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sadors, restless and by now passionately in need of diversion, turned out despite the heat to watch its entry into the city.

There was tremendous clamor. The heavy metal-studded gates of the city were thrown open and the armed escort entered first, a platoon of magnificent black warriors armed both with rifles and with scimitars. Trumpets brayed, drums pounded. A band of fierce-looking hawk-nosed fiery-eyed country chieftains in flamboyant robes came next, marching in phalanx like conquerors. And then came the salt-laden camels, an endless stream of them, a tawny river, strutting absurdly along in grotesque self-important grandeur with their heads held high and their sleepy eyes indifferent to the throngs of excited spectators. Strapped to each camel's back were two or three huge flat slabs of salt, looking much like broad blocks of marble.

"There are said to be seven hundred of the beasts," murmured the Chinese ambassador, Li Hsiao-ssu.

"One thousand eight hundred," said the Grand Duke Alexander sternly. He glowered at Li Hsiao-ssu, a small, fastidious-looking man with drooping mustachios and gleaming porcelain skin, who seemed a mere doll beside the bulky Russian. There was little love lost between the Grand Duke and the Chinese envoy. Evidently the Grand Duke thought it was presumptuous that China, as a client state of the Russian Empire, as a mere vassal, in truth, had sent an ambassador at all. "One thousand eight hundred. That is the number I was told, and it is reliable. I assure you that it is reliable."

The Chinese shrugged. "Seven hundred, three thousand, what difference is there? Either way, that's too many camels to have in one place at one time."

"Yes, what ugly things they are!" said the Peruvian, Manco Roca. "Such stupid faces, such an ungainly stride! Perhaps we should do these Africans a favor and let them have a few herds of llamas."

Coolly Prince Itzcoatl said, "Your llamas, brother, are no more fit for the deserts of this continent than these camels would be in the passes of the Andes. Let them keep their beasts, and be thankful that you have handsomer ones for your own use."

"Such stupid faces," the Peruvian said once more.

Timbuctoo was the center of distribution for salt throughout the whole of West Africa. The salt mines were hundreds of miles away, in the center of the Sahara. Twice a year the desert traders made the twelve-day journey to the capital, where they exchanged their salt for the dried fish, grain, rice, and other produce that came up the Niger from the agricultural districts to the south and east. The arrival of the caravan was the

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occasion for feasting and revelry, a time of wild big-city gaiety for the visitors from such remote and placid rural outposts.

But the Emir of Songhay was dying. This was no time for a festival. The appearance of the caravan at such a moment was evidently a great embarrassment to the city officials, a mark of bad management as well as bad taste.

"They could have sent messengers upcountry to turn them back," Michael said. "Why didn't they, I wonder?"

"Blacks," said Manco Roca morosely. "What can you expect from blacks."

"Yes, of course," Sir Anthony said, giving the Peruvian a disdainful look. "We understand that they aren't Incas. Yet despite that shortcoming they've somehow managed to keep control of most of this enormous continent for thousands of years."

"But their colossal administrative incompetence, my dear Sir Anthony—as we see here, letting a circus like this one come into town while their king lies dying—"

"Perhaps it's deliberate," Ismet Akif suggested. "A much needed distraction. The city is tense. The Emir's been too long about his dying; it's driving everyone crazy. So they decided to let the caravan come marching in."

"I think not," said Li Hsiao-ssu. "Do you see those municipal officials there? I detect signs of deep humiliation on their faces."

"And who would be able to detect such things more acutely than you?" asked the Grand Duke.

The Chinese envoy stared at the Russian as though unsure whether he was being praised or mocked. For a moment his elegant face was dusky with blood. The other diplomats gathered close, making ready to defuse the situation. Politeness was ever a necessity in such a group.

Then the envoy from the Teutonic States said, "Is that not the prince arriving now?"

"Where?" Michael demanded in a tight-strung voice. "Where is he?"

Sir Anthony's hand shot out to seize Michael's wrist. He squeezed it unsparingly.

In a low tone he said, "You will cause no difficulties, young sir. Remember that you are English. Your breeding must rule your passions."

Michael, glaring toward Little Father as the prince approached the city gate, sullenly pulled his arm free of Sir Anthony's grasp and amazed himself by uttering a strange low growling sound, like that of a cat announcing a challenge. Unfamiliar hormones flooded the channels of his body. He could feel the individual bones of his cheeks and forehead moving apart from one another, he was aware of the tensing and coiling

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of muscles great and small. He wondered if he was losing his mind. Then the moment passed and he let out his breath in a long dismal exhalation.

Little Father wore flowing green pantaloons, a striped robe wide enough to cover his arms, and an intricately deployed white turban with brilliant feathers of some exotic sort jutting from it. An entourage of eight or ten men surrounded him, carrying iron-shafted lances. The prince strode forward so briskly that his bodyguard was hard pressed to keep up with him.

Michael, watching Selima out of the corner of his eye, murmured to Sir Anthony, "I'm terribly sorry, sir. But if he so much as glances at her you'll have to restrain me."

"If you so much as flicker a nostril I'll have you billeted in our Siberian consulate for the rest of your career," Sir Anthony replied, barely moving his lips as he spoke.

But Little Father had no time to flirt with Selima now. He barely acknowledged the presence of the ambassadors at all. A stiff formal nod, and then he moved on, into the midst of the group of caravan leaders. They clustered about him like a convocation of eagles. Among those sun-crisped swarthy upright chieftains the prince seemed soft, frail, overly citified, a dabbler confronting serious men.

Some ritual of greeting seemed to be going on. Little Father touched his forehead, extended his open palm, closed his hand with a snap, presented his palm again with a flourish. The desert men responded with equally stylized maneuvers.

When Little Father spoke, it was in Songhay, a sharp outpouring of liquid incomprehensibilities.

"What was that? What was that?" asked the ambassadors of one another. Turkish was the international language of diplomacy, even in Africa; the native tongues of the dark continent were mysteries to outsiders.

Sir Anthony, though, said softly, "He's angry. He says the city's closed on account of the Emir's illness and the caravan was supposed to have waited at Kabara for further instructions. They seem surprised. Someone must have missed a signal."

"You speak Songhay, sir?" Michael asked.

"I was posted in Mali for seven years," Sir Anthony muttered. "It was before you were born, boy."

"So I was right," cried Manco Roca. "The caravan should never have been allowed to enter the city at all. Incompetence! Incompetence!"

"Is he telling them to leave?" Ismet Akif wanted to know.

"I can't tell. They're all talking at once. I think they're saying that their camels need fodder. And he's telling them that there's no mer-

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chandise for them to buy, that the goods from upriver were held back because of the Emir's illness."

"What an awful jumble," Selima said.

It was the first thing she had said all morning. Michael, who had been trying to pay no attention to her, looked toward her now in agitation. She was dressed chastely enough, in a red blouse and flaring black skirt, but in his inflamed mind she stood revealed suddenly nude, with the marks of Little Father's caresses flaring like stigmata on her breasts and thighs. Michael sucked in his breath and held himself stiffly erect, trembling like a drawn bowstring. A sound midway between a sigh and a groan escaped him. Sir Anthony kicked his ankle sharply.

Some sort of negotiation appeared to be going on. Little Father gesticulated rapidly, grinned, did the open-close-open gesture with his hand again, tapped his chest and his forehead and his left elbow. The apparent leader of the traders matched him, gesture for gesture. Postures began to change. The tensions were easing. Evidently the caravan would be admitted to the city.

Little Father was smiling, after a fashion. His forehead glistened with sweat; he seemed to have come through a difficult moment well, but he looked tired.

The trumpets sounded again. The camel-drovers regained the attention of their indifferent beasts and nudged them forward.

There was new commotion from the other side of the plaza.

"What's this, now?" Prince Itzcoatl said.

A runner clad only in a loincloth appeared, coming from the direction of the city center, clutching a scroll. He was moving fast, loping in a strange lurching way. In the stupefying heat he seemed to be in peril of imminent collapse. But he staggered up to Little Father and put the scroll in his hand.

Little Father unrolled it quickly and scanned it. He nodded somberly and turned to his vizier, who stood just to his left. They spoke briefly in low whispers. Sir Anthony, straining, was unable to make out a word.

A single chopping gesture from Little Father was enough to halt the resumption of the caravan's advance into the city. The prince beckoned the leaders of the traders to his side and conferred with them a moment or two, this time without ceremonial gesticulations. The desert men exchanged glances with one another. Then they barked rough commands. The whole vast caravan began to reverse itself.

Little Father's motorcar was waiting a hundred paces away. He went to it now, and it headed cityward, emitting belching bursts of black smoke and loud intermittent thunderclaps of inadequate combustion.

The prince's entourage, left behind in the suddenness, milled about

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aimlessly. The vizier, making shooing gestures, ordered them in some annoyance to follow their master on foot toward town. He himself held his place, watching the departure of the caravaneers.

"Ali Pasha!" Sir Anthony called. "Can you tell us what's happened? Is there bad news?"

The vizier turned. He seemed radiant with self-importance.

"The Emir has taken a turn for the worse. They think he'll be with Allah within the hour."

"But he was supposed to be recovering," Michael protested.

Indifferently, Ali Pasha said, "That was earlier. This is now." The vizier seemed not to be deeply moved by the news. If anything his smugness seemed to have been enhanced by it. Perhaps it was something he had been very eager to hear. "The caravan must camp outside the city walls until the funeral. There is nothing more to be seen here today. You should all go back to your residences."

The ambassadors began to look around for their drivers.

Michael, who had come out here with Sir Anthony in the embassy motorcar, was disconcerted to discover that the envoy had already vanished, slipping away in the uproar without waiting for him. Well, it wasn't an impossible walk back to town. He had walked five times as far in his night of no sleep.

"Michael?"

Selima was calling to him. He looked toward her, appalled.

"Walk with me," she said. "I have a parasol. You can't let yourself get any more sun on your face."

"That's very kind of you," he said mechanically, while lunatic jealousy and anger roiled him within. Searing contemptuous epithets came to his lips and died there, unspoken. To him she was ineluctably soiled by the presumed embraces of that night of shame. How could she have done it? The prince had wiggled his finger at her, and she had run to him without a moment's hesitation. Once more unwanted images surged through his mind: Selima and the prince entwined on a leopardskin rug; the prince mounting Selima in some unthinkable bestial African position of love; Selima, giggling girlishly, instructing the prince afterward in the no doubt equally depraved sexual customs of the land of the Sultan. Michael understood that he was being foolish; that Selima was free to do as she pleased in this loathsome land; that he himself had never staked any claim on her attention more significant than a few callow lovesick stares, so why should she have felt any compunctions about amusing herself with the prince if the prince offered amusement? "Very kind," he said. She handed the parasol up to him and he took it from her with a rigid nerveless hand. They began to walk side by side in the direction of town,

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close together under the narrow, precisely defined shadow of the parasol beneath the unsparing eye of the noonday sun.

She said, "Poor Michael. I've upset you terribly, haven't I?"

"Upset me? How have you possibly upset me?"

"You know."

"No. No, really."

His legs were leaden. The sun was hammering the top of his brain through the parasol, through his wide-brimmed topee, through his skull itself. He could not imagine how he would find the strength to walk all the way back to town with her.

"I've been very mischievous," she said.

"Have you?"

He wished he were a million miles away.

"By visiting the prince in his palace that night."

"Please, Selima."

"I saw you, you know. Early in the morning, when I was leaving. You ducked out of sight, but not quite fast enough."

"Selima—"

"I couldn't help myself. Going there, I mean. I wanted to see what his palace looked like. I wanted to get to know him a little better. He's very nice, you know. No, nice isn't quite the word. He's shrewd, and part of being shrewd is knowing how to seem nice. I don't really think he's nice at all. He's quite sophisticated—quite subtle."

She was flaying him, inch by inch. Another word out of her and he'd drop the parasol and run.

"The thing is, Michael, he enjoys pretending to be some sort of a primitive, a barbarian, a jungle prince. But it's only a pretense. And why shouldn't it be? These are ancient kingdoms here in Africa. This isn't any jungle land with tigers sleeping behind every palm tree. They've got laws and culture, they've got courts, they have a university. And they've had centuries to develop a real aristocracy. They're just as complicated and cunning as we are. Maybe more so. I was glad to get to know the man behind the façade, a little. He was fascinating, in his way, but—" She smiled brightly. "But I have to tell you, Michael: he's not my type at all."

That startled him, and awakened sudden new hope. Perhaps he never actually touched her, Michael told himself. Perhaps they had simply talked all night. Played little sly verbal games of oneupmanship, teasing each other, vying with each other to be sly and cruel and playful. Showing each other how complicated and cunning they could really be. Demonstrating the virtues of hundreds of years of aristocratic inbreeding. Per-

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haps they were too well bred to think of doing anything so commonplace as—as—

"What *is* your type, then?" he asked, willy-nilly.

"I prefer men who are a little shy. Men who can sometimes be foolish, even." There was unanticipated softness in her voice, conveying a sincerity that Michael prayed was real. "I hate the kind who are always calculating, calculating, calculating. There's something very appealing to me about English men, I have to tell you, precisely because they *don't* seem so dark and devious inside—not that I've met very many of them before this trip, you understand, but—oh, Michael, Michael, you're terribly angry with me, I know, but you shouldn't be! What happened between me and the prince was nothing. Nothing! And now that he'll be preoccupied with the funeral, perhaps there'll be a chance for you and me to get to know each other a little better—to slip off, for a day, let's say, while all the others are busy with the pomp and circumstance—"

She gave him a melting look. He thought for one astounded moment that she actually might mean what she was telling him.

"They're going to assassinate him," he suddenly heard his own voice saying, "right at the funeral."

"What?"

"It's all set up." The words came rolling from him spontaneously, unstoppably, like the flow of a river. "His stepmother, the old king's young wife—she's going to slip him a cup of poisoned wine, or something, during one of the funeral rituals. What she wants is to make her stupid brother king in the prince's place, and rule the country as the power behind the throne."

Selima made a little gasping sound and stepped away from him, out from under the shelter of the parasol. She stood staring at him as though he had been transformed in the last moment or two into a hippopotamus, or a rock, or a tree.

It took her a little while to find her voice.

"Are you serious? How do you know?"

"Sir Anthony told me."

"Sir Anthony?"

"He's behind it. He and the Russian and Prince Itzcoatl. Once the prince is out of the way, they're going to invite the King of Mali to step in and take over."

Her gaze grew very hard. Her silence was inscrutable, painfully so.

Then, totally regaining her composure with what must have been an extraordinary act of inner discipline, she said, "I think this is all very unlikely."

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She might have been responding to a statement that snow would soon begin falling in the streets of Timbuctoo.

"You think so?"

"Why should Sir Anthony support this assassination? England has nothing to gain from destabilizing West Africa. England is a minor power still struggling to establish its plausibility in the world as an independent state. Why should it risk angering a powerful African empire like Songhay by meddling in its internal affairs?"

Michael let the slight to his country pass unchallenged, possibly because it seemed less like a slight to him than a statement of the mere reality. He searched instead for some reason of state that would make what he had asserted seem sensible.

After a moment he said, "Mali and Songhay together would be far more powerful than either one alone. If England plays an instrumental role in delivering the throne of Songhay up to Mali, England will surely be given a preferential role by the Mansa of Songhay in future West African trade."

Selima nodded. "Perhaps."

"And the Russians—you know how they feel about the Ottoman Empire. Your people are closely allied with Songhay and don't get along well with Mali. A coup d'etat here would virtually eliminate Turkey as a commercial force in West Africa."

"Very likely."

She was so cool, so terribly calm.

"As for the Aztec role in this—" Michael shook his head. "God knows. But the Mexicans are always scheming around in things. Maybe they see some way of hurting Peru. There's a lot of sea trade, you know, between Mali and Peru—it's an amazingly short hop across the ocean from West Africa to Peru's eastern provinces in Brazil—and the Mexicans may believe they could divert some of that trade to themselves by winning the Mansa's favor by helping him gain possession of—"

He faltered to a halt. Something was happening. Her expression was starting to change. Her façade of detached skepticism was visibly collapsing, slowly but irreversibly, like a brick wall undermined by a great earthquake.

"Yes. Yes, I see. There are substantial reasons for such a scheme. And so they will kill the prince," Selima said.

"Have him killed, rather."

"It's the same thing! The very same thing!"

Her eyes began to glisten. She drew even further back from him and turned her head away, and he realized that she was trying to conceal tears from him. But she couldn't hide the sobs that racked her.

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He suspected that she was one who cried very rarely, if at all. Seeing her weep now in this uncontrollable way plunged him into an abyss of dejection.

She was making no attempt to hide her love of the prince from him. That was the only explanation for these tears.

"Selima—please, Selima—"

He felt useless.

He realized, also, that he had destroyed himself.

He had committed this monstrous breach of security, he saw now, purely in the hope of insinuating himself into her confidence, to bind her to him in a union that proceeded from shared possession of an immense secret. He had taken her words at face value when she had told him that the prince was nothing to her.

That had been a serious error. He had thought he was making a declaration of love; but all he had done was to reveal a state secret to England's ancient enemy.

He waited, feeling huge and clumsy and impossibly naïve.

Then, abruptly, her sobbing stopped and she looked toward him, a little puffy-eyed now, but otherwise as inscrutable as before.

"I'm not going to say anything about this to anyone."

"What?"

"Not to him, not to my father, not to anyone."

He was mystified. As usual.

"But—Selima—"

"I told you. The prince is nothing to me. And this is only a crazy rumor. How do I know it's true? How do *you* know it's true?"

"Sir Anthony—"

"Sir Anthony! Sir Anthony! For all I know, he's floated this whole thing simply to ensnare my father in some enormous embarrassment. I tell my father there's going to be an assassination and my father tells the prince, as he'd feel obligated to do. And then the prince arrests and expels the ambassadors of England and Russia and Mexico? But where's the proof? There isn't any. It's all a Turkish invention, they say. A scandal. My father is sent home in disgrace. His career is shattered. Songhay breaks off diplomatic relations with the Empire. No, no, don't you see, I can't say a thing."

"But the prince—"

"His stepmother hates him. If he's idiotic enough to let her hand him a cup of something without having it tested, he deserves to be poisoned. What is is that to me? He's only a savage. Hold the parasol closer, Michael, and let's get back to town. Oh, this heat! This unending heat! Do you think it'll ever rain here?" Her face now showed no sign of tears

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at all. Wearily Michael lowered the parasol. Selima utterly baffled him. She was an exhausting person. His head was aching. For a shilling he'd be glad to resign his post and take up sheep farming somewhere in the north of England. It was getting very obvious to him and probably to everyone else that he had no serious future in the diplomatic corps.

Little Father, emerging from the tunnel that led from the Emir's palace to his own, found Ali Pasha waiting in the little colonnaded gallery known as the Promenade of Askia Mohammed. The prince was surprised to see a string charm of braided black, red, and yellow cords dangling around the vizier's neck. Ali Pasha had never been one for wearing grigri before; but no doubt the imminent death of the Emir was unsettling everyone, even a piece of tough leather like Ali Pasha.

The vizier offered a grand salaam. "Your royal father, may Allah embrace him, sir—"

"My royal father is still breathing, thank you. It looks now as if he'll last until morning." Little Father glanced around, a little wildly, peering into the courtyard of his palace. "Somehow we've left too much for the last minute. The lady Serene Glory is arranging for the washing of the body. It's too late to do anything about that, but we can supply the graveclothes, at least. Get the very finest white silks; the royal burial shroud should be something out of the Thousand and One Nights; and I want rubies in the turban. Actual rubies, no damned imitations. And after that I want you to set up the procession to the Great Mosque—I'll be one of the pallbearers, of course, and we'll ask the Mansa of Mali to be another—he's arrived by now, hasn't he?—and let's have the King of Benin as the third one, and for the fourth, well, either the Asante of Ghana or the Grand Fon of Dahomey, whichever one shows up here first. The important thing is that all four of the pallbearers should be kings, because Serene Glory wants to push her brother forward to be one, and I can't allow that. She won't be able to argue precedence for him if the pallbearers are all kings, when all he is is a provincial cadi. Behind the bier we'll have the overseas ambassadors marching five abreast—put the Turk and the Russian in the front row, the Maori, too, and the Aztec and the Inca on the outside edges to keep them as far apart as we can, and the order of importance after that is up to you, only be sure that little countries like England and the Teutonic States don't wind up too close to the major powers, and that the various vassal nations like China and Korea and Ind are in the back. Now, as far as the decorations on the barge that'll be taking my father downriver to the burial place at Gao—"

"Little Father," the Vizier said, as the prince paused for breath, "the Turkish woman is waiting upstairs."

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Little Father gave him a startled look.

"I don't remember asking her to come here."

"She didn't say you had. But she asked for an urgent audience, and I thought—" Ali Pasha favored Little Father with an obscenely knowing smile. "It seemed reasonable to admit her."

"She knows that my father is dying, and that I'm tremendously busy?"

"I told her what was taking place, majesty," said Ali Pasha unctuously.

"Don't call me 'majesty' yet!"

"A thousand pardons, Little Father. But she is aware of the nature of the crisis, no question of that. Nevertheless, she insisted on—"

"Oh, damn. Damn! But I suppose I can give her two or three minutes. Stop smiling like that, damn you! I'll feed you to the lions if you don't! What do you think I am, a mountain of lechery? This is a busy moment. When I say two or three minutes, two or three minutes is what I mean."

Selima was pacing about on the porch where she and Little Father had spent their night of love. No filmy robes today, no seductively visible breasts bobbing about beneath, this time. She was dressed simply, in European clothes. She seemed all business.

"The Emir is in his last hours," Little Father said. "The whole funeral has to be arranged very quickly."

"I won't take up much of your time, then." Her tone was cool. There was a distinct edge on it. Perhaps he had been too brusque with her. That night on the porch *had* been a wonderful one, after all. She said, "I just have one question. Is there some sort of ritual at a royal funeral where you're given a cup of wine to drink?"

"You know that the Koran doesn't permit the drinking of—"

"Yes, yes, I know that. A cup of *something*, then."

Little Father studied her carefully. "This is anthropological research? The sort of thing the golden-haired woman from England came here to do? Why does this matter to you, Selima?"

"Never mind that. It matters."

He sighed. She *seemed* so gentle and retiring, until she opened her mouth.

"There's a cup ceremony, yes. It isn't wine or anything else alcoholic. It's an aromatic potion, brewed from various spices and honeys and such, very disagreeably sweet, my father once told me. Drinking it symbolizes the passage of royal power from one generation to the next."

"And who is supposed to hand you the cup?"

"May I ask why at this particularly hectic time you need to know these details?"

"Please," she said.

There was an odd urgency in her voice.

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"The former queen, the mother of the heir of the throne, is the one who hands the new Emir the cup."

"But your mother is dead. Therefore your stepmother Serene Glory will hand it to you."

"That's correct." Little Father glanced at his watch. "Selima, you don't seem to understand. I need to finish working out the funeral arrangements and then get back to my father's bedside before he dies. If you don't mind—"

"There's going to be poison in the cup."

"This is no time for romantic fantasies."

"It isn't a fantasy. She's going to slip you a cup of poison, and you won't be able to tell that the poison is there because what you drink is so heavily spiced anyway. And when you keel over in the mosque her brother's going to leap forward in the moment of general shock and tell everyone that he's in charge."

The day had been one long disorderly swirl. But suddenly now the world stood still, as though there had been an unscheduled eclipse of the sun. For a moment he had difficulty simply seeing her.

"What are you saying, Selima?"

"Do you want me to repeat it all, or is that just something you're saying as a manner of speaking because you're so astonished?"

He could see and think again. He examined her closely. She was unreadable, as she usually was. Now that the first shock of her bland statement was past, this all was starting to seem to him like fantastic nonsense; and yet, and yet, it certainly wasn't beyond Serene Glory's capabilities to have hatched such a scheme.

How, though, could the Turkish girl possibly know anything about it? How did she even know about the ritual of the cup?

"If we were in bed together right now," he said, "and you were in my arms and right on the edge of the big moment, and I stopped moving and asked you right then and there what proof you had of this story, I'd probably believe whatever you told me. I think people tend to be honest at such moments. Even you would speak the truth. But we have no time for that now. The kingship will change hands in a few hours, and I'm exceedingly busy. I need you to cast away all of your fondness for manipulative amusements and give me straight answers."

Her dark eyes flared. "I should simply have let them poison you."

"Do you mean that?"

"What you just said was insufferable."

"If I was too blunt, I ask you to forgive me. I'm under great strain today and if what you've told me is any sort of joke, I don't need it. If this isn't a joke, you damned well can't withhold any of the details."

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"I've given you the details."

"Not all. Who'd you hear all this from?"

She sighed and placed one wrist across the other.

"Michael. The tall Englishman."

"That adolescent?"

"He's a little on the innocent side, especially for a diplomat, yes. But I don't think he's as big a fool as he's been letting himself appear lately. He heard it from Sir Anthony."

"So this is an English plot?"

"English and Russian and Mexican."

"All three." Little Father digested that. "What's the purpose of assassinating me?"

"To make Serene Glory's brother Emir of Songhay."

"And serve as their puppet, I suppose?"

Selima shook her head. "Serene Glory and her brother are only the ignorant instruments of their real plan. They'll simply be brushed aside when the time comes. What the plotters are really intending to do, in the confusion following your death, is ask the Mansa of Mali to seize control of Songhay. They'll put the support of their countries behind him."

"Ah," Little Father said. And after a moment, again, "Ah."

"Mali-Songhay would favor the Czar instead of the Sultan. So the Russians like the idea. What injures the Sultan is good for the English. So they're in on it. As for the Aztecs—"

Little Father shrugged and gestured to her to stop. Already he could taste the poison in his gut, burning through his flesh. Already he could see the green-clad troops of Mali parading in the streets of Timbuctoo and Gao, where kings of Mali had been hailed as supreme monarchs once before, hundreds of years ago.

"Look at me," he said. "You swear that you're practicing no deception, Selima?"

"I swear it by—by the things we said to each other the night we lay together."

He considered that. Had she fallen in love with him in the midst of all her game-playing? So it might seem. Could he trust what she was saying, therefore? He believed he could. Indeed the oath she had just proposed might have more plausibility than any sort of oath she might have sworn on a Koran.

"Come here," he said.

She approached him. Little Father swept her up against him, holding her tightly, and ran his hands down her back to her buttocks. She pressed her hips forward. He covered her mouth with his and jammed down hard,

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not a subtle kiss but one that would put to rest forever, if that were needed, the bit of fake anthropology he had given to her earlier, about the supposed distaste of Songhayans for the act of kissing. After a time he released her. Her eyes were a little glazed, her breasts were rising and falling swiftly.

He said, "I'm grateful for what you've told me. I'll take the appropriate steps, and thank you."

"I had to let you know. I was going just to sit back and let whatever happened happen. But then I saw I couldn't conceal such a thing from you."

"Of course not, Selima."

Her look was a soft and eager one. She was ready to run off to the bedchamber with him, or so it seemed. But not now, not on this day of all days. That would be a singularly bad idea.

"On the other hand," he said, "if it turns out that there's no truth to any of this, that it's all some private amusement of your own or some intricate deception being practiced on me by the Sultan for who knows what unfathomable reason, you can be quite certain that I'll avenge myself in a remarkably vindictive way once the excitements of the funeral and the coronation are over."

The softness vanished at once. The hatred that came into her eyes was extraordinary.

"You black bastard," she said.

"Only partly black. There is much Moorish blood in the veins of the nobility of Songhay." He met her seething gaze with tranquility. "In the old days we believed in absorbing those who attempt to conquer us. These days we still do, something that the Mansa of Mali ought to keep in mind. He's got a fine harem, I understand."

"Did you *have* to throw cold water on me like that? Everything I told you was the truth."

"I hope and believe it is. I think there was love between us that night on the porch, and I wouldn't like to think that you'd betray someone you love. The question, I suppose, is whether the Englishman was telling *you* the truth. Which still remains to be seen." He took her hand and kissed it lightly, in the European manner. "As I said before, I'm very grateful, Selima. And hope to continue to be. If I may, now—"

She gave him one final glare and took her leave of him. Little Father walked quickly to the edge of the porch, spun about, walked quickly back. For an instant or two he stood in the doorway like his own statue. But his mind was in motion, and moving very swiftly.

He peered down the stairs to the courtyard below.

"Ali Pasha!"

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The vizier came running.

"What the woman wanted to tell me," Little Father said, "is that there is a plot against my life."

The look that appeared on the vizier's face was one of total shock and indignation.

"You believe her?"

"Unfortunately I think I do."

Ali Pasha began to quiver with wrath. His broad glossy cheeks grew congested, his eyes bulged. Little Father thought the man was in danger of exploding.

"Who are the plotters, Little Father? I'll have them rounded up within the hour."

"The Russian ambassador, apparently. The Aztec one. And the little Englishman, Sir Anthony."

"To the lions with them! They'll be in the pit before night comes!"

Little Father managed an approximation of a smile.

"Surely you recall the concept of diplomatic immunity, Ali Pasha?"

"But—a conspiracy against your majesty's life—!"

"Not yet my majesty, Ali Pasha."

"Your pardon." Ali Pasha struggled with confusion. "You must take steps to protect yourself, Little Father. Did she tell you what the plan is supposed to be?"

Little Father nodded. "When Serene Glory hands me the coronation cup at the funeral service, there will be poison in the drink."

"Poison!"

"Yes. I fall down dead. Serene Glory turns to her miserable brother and offers him the crown on the spot. But no, the three ambassadors have other ideas. They'll ask Mansa Suleiyman to proclaim himself king, in the name of the general safety. In that moment Songhay will come under the rule of Mali."

"Never! To the lions with Mansa Suleiyman too, majesty!"

"No one goes to the lions, Ali Pasha. And stop callling me majesty. We'll deal with this in a calm and civilized way, is that understood?"

"I am completely at your command, sir. As always."

Little Father nodded. He felt his strength rising, moment by moment. His mind was wondrously clear. He asked himself if that was what it felt like to be a king. Though he had spent so much time being a prince, he had in fact given too little thought to what the actual sensations and processes of being a king might be, he realized now. His royal father had held the kingdom entirely in his own hands throughout all his long reign. But something must be changing now.

He went unhurriedly to the edge of the porch, and stared out into the

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distance. To his surprise, there was a dark orange cloud on the horizon, sharply defined against the sky.

"Look there, Ali Pasha. The rains are coming!"

"The first cloud, yes. There it is!" And he began to finger the woven charm that hung about his neck.

It was always startling when the annual change came, after so many months of unbroken hot dry weather. Even after a lifetime of watching the shift occur, no one in Songhay was unmoved by the approach of the first cloud, for it was a powerful omen of transition and culmination, removing a great element of uncertainty and fear from the minds of the citizens; for until the change finally arrived, there was always the chance that it might never come, that this time the summer would last forever and the world would burn to a parched crisp.

Little Father said, "I should go to my father without any further delay. Certainly this means that his hour has come."

"Yes. Yes."

The orange cloud was sweeping toward the city with amazing rapidity. In another few minutes all Timbuctoo would be enveloped in blackness as a whirling veil of fine sand whipped down over it. Little Father felt the air grow moist. There would be a brief spell of intolerable humidity, now, so heavy that breathing itself would be a vast effort. And then, abruptly, the temperature would drop, the chill rain would descend, rivers would run in the sandy streets, the marketplace would become a lake.

He raced indoors, with Ali Pasha following along helter-skelter behind him.

"The plotters, sir—" the vizier gasped.

Little Father smiled. "I'll invite Serene Glory to share the cup with me. We'll see what she does then. Just be ready to act when I give the orders."

There was darkness at every window. The sandstorm was at hand. Trillions of tiny particles beat insistently at every surface, setting up a steady drumming that grew and grew and grew in intensity. The air had turned sticky, almost viscous: it was hard work to force oneself forward through it.

Gasping for breath, Little Father moved as quickly as he was able down the subterranean passageway that linked his palace with the much greater one that shortly would be his.

The ministers and functionaries of the royal court were wailing and weeping. The Grand Vizier of the realm, waiting formally at the head of the Stairs of Allah, glared at Little Father as though he were the Angel of Death himself.

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"There is not much more time, Little Father."

"So I understand."

He rushed out onto his father's porch. There had been no opportunity to bring the Emir indoors. The old man lay amidst his dazzling blankets with his eyes open and one hand upraised. He was in the correct position in which a Moslem should pass from this world to the next, his head to the south, his face turned toward the east. The sky was black with sand, and it came cascading down with unremitting force. The three saintly marabouts who had attended Big Father throughout his final illness stood above him, shielding the Emir from the shower of tiny abrasive particles with an improvised canopy, an outstretched bolt of satin.

"Father! Father!"

The Emir tried to sit up. He looked a thousand years old. His eyes glittered like lightning-bolts, and he said something, three or four congested syllables. Little Father was unable to understand a thing. The old man was already speaking the language of the dead.

There was a clap of thunder. The Emir fell back against his pillows.

The sky opened and the first rain of the year came down in implacable torrents, in such abundance as had not been seen in a thousand years.

In the three days since the old Emir's death Little Father had lived through this scene three thousand times in his imagination. But now it was actually occurring. They were in the Great Mosque; the mourners, great and simple, were clustered elbow to elbow; the corpse of Big Father, embalmed so that it could endure the slow journey downriver to the royal burial grounds, lay in splendor atop its magnificent bier. Any ordinary citizen of Songhay would have gone from his deathbed to his grave in two hours, or less; but kings were exempt from the ordinary customs.

They were done at last with the chanting of the prayer for the dead. Now they were doing the prayer for the welfare of the kingdom. Little Father held his body rigid, barely troubling to breathe. He saw before him the grand nobles of the realm, the kings of the adjacent countries, the envoys of the overseas lands, all staring, all maintaining a mien of the deepest solemnity, even those who could not comprehend a word of what was being said.

And here was Serene Glory now, coming forth bearing the cup that would make him Emir of Songhay, Great Imam, master of the nation, successor to all the great lords who had led the empire in grandeur for a thousand years.

She looked magnificent, truly queenly, more beautiful in her simple funeral robe and unadorned hair than she could ever have looked in all her finery. The cup, a stark bowl of lustrous chalcedony, so translucent

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that the dark liquor that would make him king was plainly visible through its thin walls, was resting lightly on her upturned palms.

He searched her for a sign of tremor and saw none. She was utterly calm. He felt a disturbing moment of doubt.

She handed him the cup, and spoke the words of succession, clearly, unhesitatingly, omitting not the smallest syllable. She was in full control of herself.

When he lifted the cup to his lips, though, he heard the sharp unmistakable sound of her suddenly indrawn breath, and all hestitation went from him.

"Mother," he said.

The unexpected word reverberated through the whitewashed alcoves of the Great Mosque. They must all be looking at him in bewilderment.

"Mother, in this solemn moment of the passing of the kingship, I beg you share my ascension with me. Drink with me, mother. Drink. Drink."

He held the untouched cup out toward the woman who had just handed it to him.

Her eyes were bright with horror.

"Drink with me, mother," he said again.

"No—no—"

She backed a step or two away from him, making sounds like gravel in her throat.

"Mother—lady, dear lady—"

He held the cup out, insistently. He moved closer to her. She seemed frozen. The truth was emblazoned on her face. Rage rose like a fountain in him, and for an instant he thought he was going to hurl the drink in her face; but then he regained his poise. Her hand was pressed against her lips in terror. She moved back, back, back.

And then she was running toward the door of the mosque; and abruptly the Grand Duke Alexander Petrovich, his face erupting with red blotches of panic, was running also, and also Prince Itzcoatl of Mexico.

"No! Fools!" a voice cried out, and the echoes hammered at the ancient walls.

Little Father looked toward the foreign ambassadors. Sir Anthony stood out as though in a spotlight, his cheeks blazing, his eyes popping, his fingers exploring his lips as though he could not believe they had actually uttered that outcry.

There was complete confusion in the mosque. Everyone was rushing about, everyone was bellowing. But Little Father was quite calm. Carefully he set the cup down, untouched, at his feet. Ali Pasha came to his side at once.

"Round them up quickly," he told the vizier. "The three ambassadors

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are persona non grata. They're to leave Songhay by the next riverboat. Escort Mansa Suleiyman back to the Embassy of Mali and put armed guards around the building—for purely protective purposes, of course. And also the embassies of Ghana, Dahomey, Benin, and the rest, for good measure—and as window-dressing."

"It will be done, majesty."

"Very good." He indicated the chalcedony cup. "As for this stuff, give it to a dog to drink, and let's see what happens."

Ali Pasha nodded and touched his forehead.

"And the lady Serene Glory, and her brother?"

"Take them into custody. If the dog dies, throw them both to the lions."

"Your majesty—!"

"To the lions, Ali Pasha."

"But you said—"

"To the lions, Ali Pasha."

"I hear and obey, majesty."

"You'd better." Little Father grinned. He was Little Father no longer, he realized. "I like the way you say it: *Majesty*. You put just the right amount of awe into it."

"Yes, majesty. Is there anything else, majesty?"

"I want an escort, too, to take me to my palace. Say, fifty men. No, make it a hundred. Just in case there are any surprises waiting for us outside."

"To your old palace, majesty?"

The question caught him unprepared. "No," he said after a moment's reflection. "Of course not. To my new palace. To the palace of the Emir."

Selima came hesitantly forward into the throne room, which was one of the largest, most forbidding rooms she had ever entered. Not even the Sultan's treasurehouse at the Topkapi Palace had any chamber to match this one for sheer dismal mustiness, for clutter, or for the eerie hodge-podge of its contents. She found the new Emir standing beneath a stuffed giraffe, examining an ivory globe twice the size of a man's head that was mounted on an intricately carved spiral pedestal.

"You sent for me, your highness?"

"Yes. Yes, I did. It's all calm outside there, now, I take it?"

"Very calm. *Very* calm."

"Good. And the weather's still cool?"

"Quite cool, your majesty."

"But not raining again yet?"

"No, not raining."

"Good." Idly he fondled the globe. "The whole world is here, do you

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know that? Right under my hand. Here's Africa, here's Europe, here's Russia. This is the Empire, here." He brushed his hand across the globe from Istanbul to Madrid. "There's still plenty of it, eh?" He spun the ivory sphere easily on its pedestal. "And this, the New World. Such emptiness there. The Incas down here in the southern continent, the Aztecs here in the middle, and a lot of nothing up here in the north. I once asked my father, do you know, if I could pay a visit to those empty lands. So cool there, I hear. So green, and almost empty. Just the red-skinned people, and not very many of them. Are they really red, do you think? I've never seen one." He looked closely at her. "Have you ever thought of leaving Turkey, I wonder, and taking up a new life for yourself in those wild lands across the ocean?"

"Never, your majesty."

She was trembling a little.

"You should think of it. We all should. Our countries are all too old. The land is tired. The air is tired. The rivers move slowly. We should go somewhere where things are fresh." She made no reply. After a moment's silence he said, "Do you love that tall gawky pink-faced Englishman, Selima?"

"Love?"

"Love, yes. Do you have any kind of fondness for him? Do you care for him at all? If love is too strong a word for you, would you say at least that you enjoy his company, that you see a certain charm in him, that—well, surely you understand what I'm saying."

She seemed flustered. "I'm not sure that I do."

"It appears to me that you feel attracted to him. God knows he feels attracted to you. He can't go back to England, you realize. He's compromised himself fifty different ways. Even after we patch up this conspiracy thing, and we certainly will, one way or another, the fact still remains that he's guilty of treason. He has to go somewhere. He can't stay here—the heat will kill him fast, if his own foolishness doesn't. Are you starting to get my drift, Selima?"

Her eyes rose to meet his. Some of her old self-assurance was returning to them now.

"I think I am. And I think that I like it."

"Very good," he said. "I'll give him to you, then. For a toy, if you like." He clapped his hands. A functionary poked his head into the room.

"Send in the Englishman."

Michael entered. He walked with the precarious stride of someone who has been decapitated but thinks there might be some chance of keeping his head on his shoulders if only he moves carefully enough. The only

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traces of sunburn that remained now were great peeling patches on his cheeks and forehead.

He looked toward the new Emir and murmured a barely audible courtly greeting. He seemed to have trouble looking in Selima's direction.

"Sir?" Michael asked finally.

The Emir smiled warmly. "Has Sir Anthony left yet?"

"This morning, sir. I didn't speak with him."

"No. No, I imagine you wouldn't care to. It's a mess, isn't it, Michael? You can't really go home."

"I understand that, sir."

"But obviously you can't stay here. This is no climate for the likes of you."

"I suppose not, sir."

The Emir nodded. He reached about behind him and lifted a book from a stand. "During my years as prince I had plenty of leisure to read. This is one of my favorites. Do you happen to know which book it is?"

"No, sir."

"The collected plays of one of your great English writers, as a matter of fact. The greatest, so I'm told. Shakespeare's his name. You know his work, do you?"

Michael blinked. "Of course, sir. Everyone knows—"

"Good. And you know his play *Alexius and Khurrem*, naturally?"

"Yes, sir."

The Emir turned to Selima. "And do you?"

"Well—"

"It's quite relevant to the case, I assure you. It takes place in Istanbul, not long after the Ottoman Conquest. Khurrem is a beautiful young woman from one of the high Turkish families. Alexius is an exiled Byzantine prince who has slipped back into the capital to try to rescue some of his family's treasures from the grasp of the detested conqueror. He disguises himself as a Turk and meets Khurrem at a banquet, and of course they fall in love. It's an impossible romance—a Turk and a Greek." He opened the book. "Let me read a little. It's amazing that an Englishman could write such eloquent Turkish poetry, isn't it?"

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife—

The Emir glanced up. " 'Star-cross'd lovers.' That's what you are, you know." He laughed. "It all ends terribly for poor Khurrem and Alexius,

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but that's because they were such hasty children. With better planning they could have slipped away to the countryside and lived to a ripe old age, but Shakespeare tangles them up in a scheme of sleeping potions and crossed messages and they both die at the end, even though well intentioned friends were trying to help them. But of course that's drama for you. It's a lovely play. I hope to be able to see it performed some day."

He put the book aside. They both were staring at him.

To Michael he said, "I've arranged for you to defect to Turkey. Ismet Akif will give you a writ of political asylum. What happens between you and Selima is of course entirely up to you and Selima, but in the name of Allah I implore you not to make as much of a shambles of it as Khurrem and Alexius did. Istanbul's not such a bad place to live, you know. No, don't look at me like that! If she can put up with a ninny like you, you can manage to get over your prejudices against Turks. You asked for all this, you know. You didn't *have* to fall in love with her."

"Sir, I—I—"

Michael's voice trailed away.

The Emir said, "Take him out of here, will you, Selima?"

"Come," she said. "We need to talk, I think."

"I—I—"

The Emir gestured impatiently. Selima's hand was on Michael's wrist now. She tugged, and he followed. The Emir looked after them until they had gone down the stairs.

Then he clapped his hands.

"Ali Pasha!"

The vizier appeared so quickly that there could be no doubt he had been lurking just beyond the ornate doorway.

"Majesty?"

"We have to clear this place out a little," the Emir said. "This crocodile—this absurd giraffe—find an appropriate charity and donate them, fast. And these hippo skulls, too. And this, and this, and this—"

"At once, majesty. A clean sweep."

"A clean sweep, yes."

A cool wind was blowing through the palace now, after the rains. He felt young, strong, vigorous. Life was just beginning, finally. Later in the day he would visit the lions at their pit. ●

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A MISSIONARY OF THE MUTANT RAIN FOREST

by Bruce Boston

In nomine Patris et Filii et Felidae Sancti

Cassock torn, rorshached by blood and sweat,
a detailed gold crucifix with broken chain
clutched so fiercely in one skeletal fist
that an intaglio of the thrice-nailed Jesus
imprints like a scar in the hollow of his palm,
he treads through patches of light and shadow
cast by vast vegetal eruptions he cannot name
except to christen them infernal or sublime.
Having penetrated further into the wilderness

than any of his far less stalwart brethren,
all of whom have fled to the coast or died,
his aquiline features are increasingly set
in a rigorous mask of beatific masochism,
he is sustained by the fervor of a faith
more maniacal than the landscape he tracks.
The creatures of the forest do not harm him,
in awe of the madness inherent in his quest.
Swarming clouds of carnivorous redjackets

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shun the taste of his pale fevered flesh.
Or it may be his sermons that protect him,
leaden tracts rehearsed till letter perfect
in the sanctum of some distant spartan cell,
now raged and chanted through the awful glens,
against the scattered shards of unthatched sky,
embellished by a rising hallucinatory passion,
peppered with the mucous rattle of his breath.
On a morning born from nightmares he awakens,

no memory in his mind of how he came to sleep;
the congregation he has sought is all about him,
a flock of clever felines who walk upon two feet.
With the scraps of human tongue they've gathered,
they listen to his tales of the sacrificial son.
Here *his* faith is heresy, *his* form abomination,
he whets their appetites with his talk of blood.
As their paws and claws defrock him, pry the gold
from his hands, strip away his sacerdotal shreds,

his dreams take flight beyond a martyr's death.
He envisions the pomp of his future consecration,
in the Holy City, a host of hosannas sung on high,
yet the fate he soon discovers is far from divine.
Bound by mutant skins, stained with mutant dyes,
he becomes a penitent before a graven shrine,
novitiate and servant to a pagan panther priest.
For visionary madness is familiar to their kind,
and they only devour the ones they cannot teach.

In the ghetto of Caracas you can see him every day,
an excommunicate, a derelict, a holy man some claim,
a strangely-tattooed apparition both hirsute and gray,
who preaches the imminence of a feline Second Coming,
and sees the reborn Saviour as a bestial incarnation
complete with taloned forepaws and the eyes of a cat.

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

THE ART OF EDITING

Iris, William Barton & Michael Capobianco, Doubleday/Foundation, $19.95 (hc)/$8.95 (tp)
Consider Phlebas, Iain M. Banks, St. Martin's, $18.95 (hc)
The Fall of Hyperion, Dan Simmons, Doubleday/Foundation, $18.95 (hc)/$8.95 (tp)

It has been justly said that the history of modern science fiction, at least modern Anglophone science fiction, is as much a history of editors as it is of writers. Perhaps uniquely in all literature, the science fiction genre has been created, shaped, molded, and evolved by a series of editors, some of whom deserve the epithet "great" as much as any of "their" authors.

Science fiction is certainly just about the only field of literature to have produced a succession of *famous* editors, as well-known to the regular readers as many of the writers, and then some. We seem to take this for granted, but, aside from Saint Maxwell Perkins, how many editors outside the SF genre can serious readers even name?

Indeed the modern science fiction genre, or put the other way around, science fiction *as* a genre, was itself the invention of an editor, Hugo Gernsback, for whom the Hugo award itself is named, surely the only literary award extant to memorialize an editor.

In 1926, Gernsback, deploring the scientific and technological ignorance of American youth, decided to do something about it and make a buck in the process. He took the general template of the pulp adventure magazines of the day, and rang his own didactic change on it.

While the settings of all these adventure pulps varied, the plots and level of literary sophistication were all pretty much the same, and there was a community of pulp writers who wrote westerns, mysteries, African adventure, and so forth, more or less interchangeably.

Instead of running heroes versus villains through the old west or the African jungle, run it through *the future*. Make the hero a scientist of some sort, and make the McGuffin a scientific or technological one, and give the generally young readers a sugar-coated science lesson in the process, and hey presto, *Amazing Stories*, what Gernsback called "scientifiction."

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By the middle 1930s, it was already called "science fiction," there were several pulp magazines publishing the stuff, and it was time for another editor, John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding*, to invent the "science fiction writer."

Pre-Campbell, most science fiction was written by pulp magazine generalists, the bulk of it was action-adventure fiction with futuristic or off-planet settings, and most of the rest of it was like Gernsback's own story "Ralph 124C," didactic travelogues of the technological wonders of the future with the viewpoint character as long-winded tour guide.

Campbell changed all that forever. Campbell had passion and a mission. Campbell gave science fiction an intellectual core, and a literary angle of attack. Campbell wasn't interested in using science and technology to create an exotic setting for adventure stories, nor in using adventure stories to sneak a scientific education into the minds of callow youth.

Campbell wanted a fiction that explored new scientific ground and theory, but he also wanted that fiction to be centered on the exploration of how scientific innovation and technological evolution affected society and the lives of its citizens, how the evolution of the technosphere molded the evolution of culture. And that is where, one way or another, science fiction has been intellectually centered ever since.

Campbell was full of story ideas and wild scientific theories (see his story, "Twilight," which contains most of the ideas of ten years' worth of SF at under ten thousand words), and his contract called for him to give up publishing fiction under his own by-line, so he ended up pouring all this into the brains of his writers, the first true "science fiction writers."

To write for Campbell, you needed to be able to appear scientifically literate, and if you weren't, he would supply the education. Beyond that, Campbell wanted stories centered on genuine scientific speculation, which was the sort of "story idea" he tossed to writers. Campbell wanted writers who at least knew what he was talkin[redacted] about, and when he found them, l[redacted] self-consciously set out to develop them.

Not all of the generalized pulp writers were up to this, and as time went on, Campbell, who religiously read his own slushpile, found new writers therein, and trained them as science fiction specialists.

The so-called "Golden Age" science fiction writers were not pulp hacks writing westerns in outer space, they were *science fiction* writers whose work had a certain intellectual passion and substance. Asimov. Van Vogt. Williamson. Heinlein. De Camp. Simak. Kuttner. Moore. Even Sturgeon.

That's why it's still called the Golden Age of science fiction, though it could just as well be called the Campbell Age, not because this pre-World War II SF

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represents the literary high-point of the genre, which it doesn't, but because it represents the birth of science fiction as a serious intellectual endeavor and the development of a science fiction literary community.

After World War II, Betty and Ian Ballantine, a husband and wife team, with Ian as the publisher and Betty as the editor, established a regular line of SF paperback novels, followed by other such lines at other publishers, notably Donald A. Wollheim's line at Ace.

And two new magazines, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Anthony Boucher, and *Galaxy*, edited by H.L. Gold, created, in tandem with the birth of mass-market SF paperbacks, the next stage in science fiction's literary evolution.

Campbell was never really interested in literary values as such. His editorial focus was on speculation. Boucher's goal was to call into being a science fiction that could stand up in literary company—good prose, subtle characterization, stories with real human dimension—science fiction written to be enjoyed by literate adults. Gold favored stories with psychological depth, sardonic insight, and was more than willing to accept fiction centered on speculations within the spheres of "soft sciences" like sociology and psychology as central material for science fiction.

These two new editorial viewpoints synced nicely with each other, since the kind of content Gold was interested in needed the literary skills that Boucher demanded to be carried off successfully. Ironically enough, both synced well with the shift from science fiction as primarily a mode for short fiction to science fiction as a mode for novels, since SF needed more of both to retain reader interest at novel length.

The best writers of the day wrote for both Boucher and Gold, many of them for Campbell, too, at least at first, and the result was the development of writers whose work of the period stands up even today. Leiber. Pohl. Budrys. Bester. Dick. Kornbluth. Anderson. Miller. Sturgeon. Bradbury.

If the Campbell Age was golden, the Boucher-Gold Age shipped platinum.

In the 1960s, when the young and the new was in rebellion against the old and established everywhere, Michael Moorcock took over the editorship of the British SF magazine *New Worlds* with a radical proposition.

Namely, that both SF and "mainstream" literature had ossified into stylized fossilations, the former into a set of genre conventions, the latter into an exhaustion of retrospective material in an age which called for a literature centered on on-going mutation.

What was needed was a hybrid literature that opened up the stale air of the literary salons to what was blowing in the wind and opened up the writing of science fiction to

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the full panoply of the literary possible in terms of formal and stylistic experimentation. "The Medium is the Message," as Marshall McLuhan was proclaiming at the time.

Voilà, the birth of the New Wave.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the radical editorial emphasis was on the liberation of content. Partly because of its birth in the boy's adventure pulps, science fiction was generally conceived of as having a primarily juvenile audience. So writers were generally constrained to write with a Mrs. Grundy looking over their shoulders to make sure that nothing they wrote soiled the tender young minds of her charges. It was a big deal to sneak "fuck" in Swahili past Kay Tarrant, Campbell's guardian of righteousness, and into the magazine as the name of a Martian.

Harlan Ellison set out to explode all this with an anthology of original short fiction called *Dangerous Visions*. Not only were there to be no taboos, the writers were *encouraged* to write stories that would inflame the ire of those who sought to erect them.

At roughly the same time, Terry Carr began editing the Ace Science Fiction Specials, a line of novels aimed at publishing Carr's conception of the top of the field in novel form, and George Ernsberger, at Avon, became editor of another SF book line, this one a receptive market for the furthest out product of the leading edge.

What came out the other end was a science fiction permanently freed of all limitations—sexual, political, linguistic, stylistic, and formal—a science fiction free to become what its practitioners made of it, a science fiction limited only by the talent, imagination, and courage of its writers. Without the editorial courage of Moorcock, Ellison, Ernsberger, and Carr, this never could have happened.

The editorial giant of the 1970s, Judy-Lynn del Rey, though a former Joyce scholar, among other things, was a commercial genius, not a literary one. It was she, who, through luck, timing, and skill, took science fiction book publishing into the big time, riding the wave of *Star Trek, Star Wars*, and the birth of the science fiction generation of adolescents. She perceived the expanded media-age audience, and set out to capture it with carefully selected product, and she succeeded.

Just about everything that has happened since, in one way or another, is the result of the trail she blazed. Judy-Lynn del Rey realized that there was a large mass audience for a certain kind of science fiction spawned by *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* (it was she who published Alan Dean Foster's pseudonymous novelization of Lucas' script, which she acquired for peanuts before the film came out), and that it was mostly adolescent, or adolescent at heart when it came to its entertainment. She, more than anyone else, except perhaps Lucas and Gene Roddenberry them-

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selves, created the "SF Boom" of the 1970s, which by now has become a permanent condition, an SF industry maintaining a 15 percent to 20 percent share of the American fiction market, capable of putting bestsellers at the top of the list.

Even David Hartwell's *Timescape* line at Pocket Books was a reaction to the influence of Judy-Lynn del Rey. Pocket Books wanted a line that would emulate her commercial success, and Hartwell wanted to show that it could be done with work of literary quality.

Thus, the evolution of SF from 1926 to the present as editorial history.

But what of the present? Where are the Campbells, Golds, Bouchers, Moorcocks, Ellisons, Carrs, and Ernsbergers of today? We certainly have plenty of SF editors trying to be Judy-Lynn del Rey, but where are the editors dedicated to literary purposes?

There are a few of them around. Shawna McCarthy and later Gardner Dozois transformed this very magazine into a venue for much of the cutting edge short SF of the past decade. Ellen Datlow has maintained consistently high literary standards at *Omni* and published much of the early efforts of what was to become the cyberpunk movement.

But where are the *book* editors with Campbellian fire in their eyes? Where are the book editors seeking to encourage the next stages in science fiction's literary evolution? Where are the book editors who even conceive of their job as a literary mission?

There are a few who try. There is Lou Aronica at Bantam, but he has been promoted up to the executive suite and doesn't do much real editing these days. There is David Hartwell, who succeeded on a literary level at *Timescape*, but whose line there was canceled when it failed to give Pocket Books the same sort of numbers that Judy-Lynn del Rey was racking up at Ballantine, and who is still in the game on a smaller scale at Morrow. Nick Austin at Grafton in Britain, who is more of a publishing executive these days. Gerard Klein and Jacques Chambon in France, Wolfgang Jeschke in Germany.

But even the lines of *these* editors don't seem to hold everything to a consistent literary standard. Even these editors seem to be publishing too many books that don't seem to have really been edited at all.

What do I mean by editing?

The first job of an editor is to acquire manuscripts, either by selecting with a keen eye from the submissions that come pouring in, or by commissioning work from writers. In the first instance, editorial skill is a matter of exercising taste. In the second, it becomes a matter of intellectual collaboration in the very act of creation.

The other job of an editor is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the acquired manuscript, and work with the writer to improve it to the extent possible.

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That's editing, period. All else—contract negotiation, cover copy, jacket illustration, sales meetings, promotion—is being a publishing executive.

The trouble is that these days the same people are wearing both hats. George Ernsberger said it all when he was editor-in-chief of Berkley Books, shortly before he left publishing. "You can't win," he moaned. "I wanted the power to edit my books my way, and now that I have it, I find that I don't have the time to do it."

Ernsberger was the editor-in-chief of a publishing house when he said that, but today it applies to the titular head of just about any science fiction line. Science fiction is now big business. Your science fiction editor may be responsible for getting out thirty to one hundred titles a year, a significant portion of a publisher's annual investment, and the accountants are now paying close attention. There are endless editorial meetings, sales conferences, cover copy and jacket decisions, meetings with distributors, cons to attend, backs to slap. The SF editor's career now rises and falls according to sales figures, not Hugos, Nebulas, or glowing reviews.

How can anyone find time to really creatively edit two to ten books a month under circumstances like these?

They can't. It's plain impossible.

True, you can hire assistants to do the real line editing, but to the extent that they prove their worth, they are stepwise and salarywise promoted off the firing line and into executive positions. Today, beyond a certain modest salary level, an editor's career success is determined by his ability at these ancillary functions, not by literary insight or skill with a blue pencil.

Thus, even what would seem to be the most basic and obvious editorial jobs often never seem to get done, perhaps because they are not even attempted, or worse still, because they are in conflict with the sacred bottom line.

Foundation Books certainly showed editorial acumen in acquiring *Iris*, by William Barton and Michael Capobianco, apparently a first novel. Surely one of the thrills of editing is discovering something like this in the slush-pile, and surely one of the primary skills of an editor is to be able to spot it, and surely one of the primary duties of an editor is to publish work like this.

It must have taken some courage, too, since one is introduced to this exceedingly realistically portrayed and three-dimensional future culture in the course of a description of a blowjob, and a masterful little piece of writing it is, too, rendered with a psychological depth and imagistic density that gives you the world and one of the central character relationships in the first page and a half.

Nor does *Iris* let the reader down on this level afterward. Seldom do you get a rendering of a more or less solar-system wide civilization

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as detailed, dense, well worked-out, and solid as this, and less often still with this level of characterological depth skillfully worked in so that the speculatively altered lives of the characters arise seamlessly out of the evolution of the technosphere.

It's reminiscent of Samuel R. Delany at his best—*Nova, Babel-17, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* with an interesting storyline worked in. It's reminiscent of Delany in another way, too. Barton and Capobianco live up to the promise of the opening, and deal unflinchingly with the psychosexual and emotional lives of their characters; homosexuality, group sex, even fetishism of a sort are dealt with strictly from the viewpoint of the society being portrayed, which accepts them as normal, not from the point of view of the twentieth century leering through a keyhole.

The result is a portrait of a culture that is deeply grounded in the roots of the characters' beings, and characters whose beings arise directly out of their cultural matrix.

What kind of culture is it? A culture with fairly easy but not quite facile access to all the outer planets and satellites. A culture in which a small group of people can pack everything they need into a spaceship and go off to a totally hostile ice-ball existing under cryogenic conditions to set up a permanent self-sustaining colony. A culture where direct brain-to-hardware interfacing with the datasphere is so complete that there is little distinction between base-reality and the artificial realities accessible through software, a society where most people are cyborgs of a sort, in terms of having integrated artificial augments into their consciousness.

Into the outer reaches of this solar system drifts the Iris of the title, a small gas giant from outside the system, accompanied by a small retinue of ice-ball satellites. For various personal reasons given in long flashback sequences, a group of people come together to flee civilization and set up a colony on one of Iris's moons.

It turns out that Iris is a starship of sorts, the product of a successor civilization to a successor civilization to a civilization that originated in the early days of the universe. The second half of the novel is the complex story of the human characters' interaction with the denizens of Iris, largely via electronic connection, during the course of which we get, among other things, the entire history of life in the universe, and many sequences from the points of view of two levels of alien consciousness, as human and alien consciousnesses merge, and to some extent become each other.

It's all quite well done—the character development, the detailed technological extrapolation, the unique and strange succession of alien civilizations, the aliens themselves. The trouble is that, at 436

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pages, it's all more than a bit *over*-done.

The editor who bought this novel did the acquisition job admirably, although, on the other hand, you could say that was easy, since a first novel written with this level of maturity and depth fairly leaps up out of the slushpile screaming "Buy me!"

But why, oh why, didn't someone *edit* this thing?

Iris is a good novel with certain obvious flaws that could have and should have easily been corrected in the editorial process.

For one thing, there are too many flashback sequences, and most of them go on for too long. They slow down the pace of the main story to a crawl at times—to the point where we don't know about the aliens in Iris till well into the second half of the book.

For another thing, there are long, long sidesteps into an electronically generated fantasy world that too often amount to little more than action loops, slowing things down further.

And finally, there are things like this:

"The core of the structure . . . was the heavy ion-drive unit . . . to one side of the Hyloxo matrices . . . recharged with H_2O/O_2 fuel. . . . The ion drill/engine was a voracious device . . . Though it used fuel efficiently, it did so at a high cost in electromagnetic energy. . . . The ion fuel itself, through its automatic breakdown process, was a form of stored energy, ultimately stabilized by the fusion reactor. The complex's Magnaflux generator, intended for attitude control and as an important part of the life-support system, was an em-field manipulation device. Though batteries were no longer a major part of the technological surround . . . the generator could contain stored energy for a certain period of time. It would work, over the short term . . . recharged . . . via microwave beams . . . It would work, after a fashion, and accomplish their purposes. . . ."

They built a jury-rigged spaceship that worked.

Iris is full of technological prolixity like this. When one character builds an ice-ball-going version of a 1960 Corvette, we are even forced to endure a detailed description of the transmogrification of internal combustion engine technology into an analog capable of working on an airless moon.

What *Iris* cried out for in manuscript was a simple job of line-editing. It could and should have been quick and easy. Writers all too often become enamored of their own prose, and science fiction writers frequently can't see that they're overburdening the reader and the story with excess detail and description in the act of extrapolating it all for themselves. That's why God, or some less exalted entity, created editors.

The editor should have marked up the manuscript and sent it to the writers for cutting. More ideally, the three of them should have

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sat down somewhere with a good supply of blue pencils and gone over the manuscript together, simply pruning excess verbiage, shortening over-long sequences, cutting out a few sequences entirely, and tightening the book up. A line-cut of maybe 10 percent would have improved this book 100 percent in terms of pace and readability.

In the bad old days, an editor might have done this unilaterally himself; today, writers would scream at such editorial rewriting, and rightly so. It *is* the writers' book, not the editor's, and the writers should have what is called in the film industry the "final cut."

But part of the editor's job should be educative, particularly with newer writers. Not only would *Iris* have been greatly improved by being put through a line-edit, Barton and Capobianco would have learned much in the process, to the betterment of their future work.

When I wrote *Songs From The Stars*, I wrote in sequences incorporating a significant amount of something like verse, knowing that my editor, David Hartwell, was also an experienced editor of poetry, who would be able to tell me whether or not I was making a fool of myself, in which case I would take the verse out.

It was David's opinion that the verse more or less worked, nothing that a line-edit couldn't fix. But he felt that the descriptive material surrounding the verse would work better if it was rewritten into metric prose. "Not one reader in ten will notice it," he said, "but it *will* make it better, and *we* will know."

And so we sat down with the manuscript and line-edited about sixty pages, not merely phrase by phrase or word by word, but syllable by syllable, phoneme by phoneme. I learned more about the music of prose from that editorial experience than I had ever dreamed it was possible to learn.

That is what the art of editing should ideally be all about.

And what it so seldom is these days.

Admittedly, part of the blame can be the writer's. For older writers, who remember all too well when editing meant taking out dirty words or sex scenes or cutting novels to meet a publisher's artificial length requirements, the editorial process was long an adversarial one, and "editing" became synonymous with editorial interference. Young writers, who may have gone through the writer's workshop process, with ego-tripping peers picking their work to pieces in order to feel better about their own, can often end up feeling the same way.

A lot of science fiction writers, particularly those with clout, often simply won't submit to the editorial process, or if they do, make the work an agony for the editor. This, to put it bluntly, is stupid. Particularly if you have the clout to avoid editorial diktats, you gain nothing by refusing to listen to editorial *advice* when you are fortunate enough to get advice worth listen-

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ing to. It's your final cut, you can do what you want to, the editor has to convince you to make changes, so it's entirely self-defeating or just plain lazy to refuse to have flaws pointed out, or to fix them when they are.

If part of an editor's job is to discover and cultivate good writers, writers should also keep an eye out for good editors and encourage them to do their real work. There are precious few of them doing it consistently.

Judging from Iain M. Banks' *Consider Phlebas*, the situation may not be that much better in Britain, where the novel was originated. Banks is a tremendously talented young writer, and one whose non-SF novels, *The Wasp Factory* and *Espedair Street*, clearly demonstrate that he has it under craftsmanlike control as well. Place description, mordancy, humor, passion, irony, economy of style, literate sophistication, street-smarts—Banks has it all, and he's put it together more than once in novels without significant flaw, novels almost perfect of their kinds.

Having previously read *The Wasp Factory* and *Espedair Street*, I began *Consider Phlebas* with keen anticipation; what would a writer of this talent and craftsmanship do with a complex galactic civilization as a setting and the far future as his playground?

Alas, while Banks' inventiveness, humor, irony, ability with description, and sophistication are all there in this wider realm, formally, the novel just doesn't hold up. Sequence by sequence, *Consider Phlebas* is a pleasurable experience, but the whole sags badly towards the middle, and finally ends up as less than the sum of its parts.

It didn't have to be that way. Banks' setting is a vastly complex galactic civilization at war. Humans have spread among the stars and evolved into different species, and there are all sorts of levels of alien civilizations, too. The war between the human "Culture" and the alien Iridans covers decades of time and hundreds of planets and what it is about is far too complex, and, indeed futile, to be easily summarized.

If you think this is far too much to deal with coherently, you are right, and Banks, to his credit, realized it too, relegating the geopolitical vastness to a series of appendices, and focusing the action down on a single minor tactical mission.

Horza is a "Changer," a species of human that, among other things, can alter their appearances to mimic anyone. For complex reasons that he at least thinks are philosophical, he is working for the alien Iridans in the war with the Culture. A ship bearing a militarily valuable Culture "Mind" (basically an Artificial Intelligence of immense power housed in a fifteen-meter long mobile shell) has been destroyed, the Mind has taken refuge somewhere in a tunnel system beneath a dead world, and Horza's

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mission is to get to the planet, and capture the Mind for the Iridans.

That's the plot. It could have worked. It should have worked. To some extent, it *has* worked. In order to fulfill his assignment, Horza must escape from the Culture, make his lone way to the target world, and capture the Mind, narrowing the focus down to something manageable, and giving the novel drive. To do all this, he ends up having to join a group of mercenaries, escape from various scrapes on a huge Orbital—a Niven-scale Ringworld—impersonate the leader, get to the target world, and track down the Mind.

Along the way, we get lots of set-pieces elucidating bits and pieces of Banks' complex galactic civilization, and better still, much mordant commentary on the war, the cultures, and the characters, most notably Horza himself, who is not exactly your true-blue galactic hero type. Nor, despite the setting of a vast galactic war, are we overwhelmed with transcendent moments of life and death for whole civilizations.

Banks certainly had the right idea and he chose the right form. But instead of doing what that form implied and writing a nice terse fast-moving little novel, or alternatively a longer novel focused on character using this basically simple plot as a mere armature, Banks has padded out *Consider Phelbas* to 467 pages with endless long action loops that, while well-done and even somewhat interesting in and of themselves, advance the story and character development not at all.

The whole section called "The Eaters," for example, all thirty-eight pages of it, while admittedly amusing and interesting, could have, and should have been eliminated entirely without changing the story a bit, to the enhancement of the whole book. There are all too many sequences like this, sequences horribly reminiscent of David Brin's *Startide Rising*, in which a spaceship fleeing the set-up in the previous novel crashes on a planet, and manages to take off at least 150,000 words later to continue the story in the next installment.

And the individual action-loops are for the most part internally over-long too, and would have benefited greatly from some blue pencil work.

What happened here? A lazy or overworked editor? Or worse still, as all too common these days, an editor working *against* the literary imperatives and in favor of commercial constraints?

Who knows, Banks may just have handed in a much shorter manuscript, and the editor just might have told him that he wanted a longer book. Put in some more action sequences so we can justify the cover price we want to put on this, Iain, I can hear the editor saying.

I can hear this voice clearly because I've heard it myself twice. When I handed in my first novel, *The Solarians*, at fifty-five thou-

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sand words, I was told it was too short. "The contract calls for sixty thousand words, kid, make it five thousand words longer somehow."

And when I handed in *The Iron Dream* at about seventy thousand words, none other than George Ernsberger himself, one of my editorial heroes, but not immune to the sacred bottom line, told me to make it about ten thousand words longer to justify the advance and the cover price they wanted to put on it.

I don't know whether this was what happened to *Consider Phelbas*, but I do know that it *does* happen, and these days, worse things, too.

One of the worst current examples is what seems to have happened to Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Hyperion, as detailed in a previous column, turned out to be a 482-page $18.95 set-up for *The Fall of Hyperion*, which brought the cast of characters together on the planet of the title, painted an interesting and well-rounded future culture as they told their lives' tales in long flashbacks which occupied the majority of those pages, and then ended abruptly in mid-air right before what had been set up as the denouement, with the Ouster "barbarians" beginning their invasion, the ominous Time Tombs opening, and the cast of characters on their way to their fateful meetings with the mysterious and baleful Shrike within.

What happens next? It'll cost you another $18.95 for *The Fall of Hyperion* (517 more pages) to find out, sucker!

Well, as a reviewer who gets these books for free, I felt cheated enough at the so-called ending of *Hyperion*. Had I been a reader who had shelled out $18.95, nothing would have gotten me to throw good money after bad. But of course, I got *The Fall of Hyperion* as a freebie, too, admired Simmons' previous work, and, generally speaking, rather liked *Hyperion*, too, until I reached the godawful cliffhanger ending.

What can I say? The publishing strategy succeeded to the point where I couldn't keep from reading the sequel, even if I would never have actually bought it. What I hoped was that these books were simply one huge novel that had to be cut in half for commercial reasons, and that *The Fall of Hyperion* would pick up where *Hyperion* left off.

Timewise, it sort of does. The Time Tombs do open, the viewpoint characters do wander into and around them, and into various future, alternate, and cyber realities, each does have their fateful confrontation with the Shrike, the whole complex plot is shown from these various (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) viewpoints to be based upon a future struggle between a "god" created by the Artificial Intelligences of the so-called Technocore and a "god" that has somehow evolved spontaneously out of the human collec-

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tive unconscious or some such thing. *The Fall of Hyperion* takes the set-up of *Hyperion* into higher metaphysical realms, rings some nice changes on what we thought reality was, ties up the plot threads, brings the main characters to their personal apotheoses, and does come to a more or less satisfying closure, but not without laying in the groundwork for a possible sequel.

But alas, it all seems somewhat over-complicated, vague, less than logically and intellectually rigorous, metaphysically confused; the character developments are more or less resolved, the plotline reaches a proper formal climax, the major mysteries are more or less explained, but the whole thing just never seems to cohere into the true clarity of vision that Simmons seems to have intended.

This is compounded (indeed perhaps caused) by the fact that it seems to take Simmons forever to bring *The Fall of Hyperion* back up to the impending climax that left the reader hanging high and dry at the end of *Hyperion*, as the real-time story slows down to an agonizing crawl, while he rehashes most of what has gone on before with flashbacks, expository lumps, and characters "as-you-knowing" each other.

And when we do finally get there, the climax seems to be taking place in leaden slow-motion, as Simmons resorts to more of the same to exfoliate level after semi-contradictory level elucidating what's *really* going on, for hundreds of pages.

I don't know whether Simmons originally wrote this as one big novel which the editor decided to break into two volumes, or whether he was a co-conspirator from the outset, but either way, this is a textbook case of what I can only call "anti-editing."

Structurally, *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* could only have worked as one huge novel. Commercially, of course, a 999 page hardcover going for about $35 would be out of the question. But on the other hand, for anyone who has read *Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion* would be greatly improved by a hundred page cut, which is to say all the redundant back-story stuff that makes it slog so leadenly. Of course, if you hadn't read *Hyperion*, that would leave you wondering what the hell was going on for about half of the second book.

This is the inherent paradox of the novel series form. If you write the sequel so that someone who hasn't read the first book gets brought up to date, you bore the piss out of readers who have, and if you don't, no one who hasn't read the first book is going to make much sense out of the second.

The only way out of it is to somehow bring volume one to an internally satisfying minor climax and then somehow open volume two with a short bravura intro, or even append a plot summary of volume one and be done with it.

Here, however, there was a misguided attempt to package a single huge novel as two free-standing

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books, with the result being that the first volume ends in mid-air and the second is bloated into torpidity with about one hundred pages of back story that never should have been written.

Admittedly, commercially speaking, the editor was between a rock and a soft place. A 999 page $35 hardcover would be commercial seppuku, whereas with two $18.95 books, you are going to ship much more than twice the number of copies that you could with the single volume behemoth, and at more than twice the total cover price, too.

That's what I mean by anti-editing. The bottom line virtually forced the editor to publish this novel in a form that went contrary to the imperatives of literary success.

In an ideal world, if Simmons had handed this in as one big novel, the editor would never have had him write in all that tedious rehash of back story in *The Fall of Hyperion*, and if he had handed it all in in the form that saw publication in the *real* world, the editor would have gotten out the old blue pencil, sat down with the writer, and condensed the two manuscripts into one big novel that worked.

But this is not an ideal world. In this world, even an eight hundred page novel would have to cost about twenty-five dollars, at which price it would be a barely marginal commercial enterprise.

What would I have done had I been the editor? Maybe, like George Ernsberger, I would have sought another line of work.

But maybe not. Maybe I would have gone to the accountants and gotten an absolute limit on the length (and therefore cover price) of what I could publish and worked with Simmons to cut the whole manuscript down to that length.

The Fall of Hyperion, as the second half of one novel, would have been greatly improved on a literary level by a hundred page cut, and with the weight of all the complex story to come, *Hyperion* would only be improved by a substantial cut, too. If this still came in a hundred pages too long, well, there isn't a book-length manuscript that would be really harmed by a more or less arbitrary ten percent word-by-word cut, and you could always cheat the margins a bit and go to somewhat smaller type.

Sure, this would not exactly be pur sang literary editing, no doubt the writer would piss and moan, but negotiating some kind of reasonable compromise between the Muse and Mammon has always been part of the art of editing. A dirty job, maybe, but not a dishonorable one.

This not being an ideal world, the choice for Simmons and his editor was to do the dirty work of getting this material down to a length that could be published in its proper form, or taking the easy way out, and publishing one "novel" without a satisfying closure and a second "novel" burdened with endless back-story fill-in.

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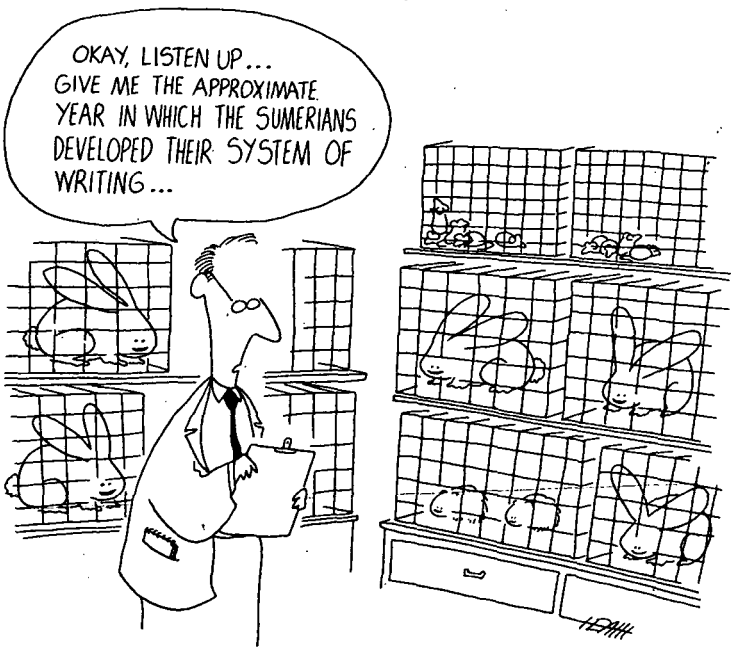
Either way, total literary purity was going to have to be compromised. Either option forces a certain amount of "anti-editing."

Then again, who knows, maybe not.

Even shorn of the rehashing of the events of the previous book, *The Fall of Hyperion* would still be somewhat confusing and overcomplex, with its segues into the former life of the electronically resurrected John Keats, its profusion of time-travel loops, its convoluted metaphysics. And the ending, while formally satisfying, still leaves a certain vagueness and confusion as to exactly what really happened and what the central theme was really all about.

Who knows, maybe if Simmons had been constrained to cut the whole thing to an arbitrary length, it might have disciplined his thinking, forced him to make each scene count, even clarified his vague vision of the grand whole.

Sometimes, with a little judicious editorial judo, the diktats of Mammon can be made to serve the Muse after all. In the real world, that can be part of the art of editing, too. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

A couple of con(vention)s in eastern Europe this month. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. Evening is usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and say what it's for). For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a keyboard.

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23-27—**ConFiction.** For info, write: **% Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Or call **(800) 225-1699 or (201) 464-3300** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: The Hague, Holland (if city omitted, same as in address). World SF Con. Guests include: Joe Haldeman, W. Jeschke, H. Harrison.

24-26—**BuboniCon. (505) 266-8905.** Albuquerque NM. J.Roberson. If you can't make it to Holland.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego. (619) 461-1917.** Omni Horton Plaza, San Diego CA. North American SF Con.

SEPTEMBER 1990

3-9—**SocCon, Runev, Reka Veleka 18D/3, Sofia 1517 Bulgaria 47-29-04.** Burgas, Bulgaria. Rest up. . . .

7-9—**ParCon, % Ondrej Herec, Kamenarska 8, Bratislava 821 04, Czechoslovakia.** ...from WorldCon...

7-9—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 730-8648, 838-6873, 849-3338.** ...or NASFiC.

14-16—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364.** C. Cherryh, Waller, Fancher, Worley.

21-23—**InCon, Box 1026, Spokane WA 99210. (509) 624-4330.** Ing, B. Mott, Mirr, Finkbiner, Dalmas.

22-23—**ValleyCon, % Tony Tilton, Box 7202, Fargo ND 58108. (701) 232-1954.** No guests listed.

28-30—**Georgia Fantasy Con, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362, (404) 925-2813.** Moorcock, Ellison, Gould.

28-30—**ConText, % Fanaco, Box 2954, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436.** For the written SF word.

28-30—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244. (319) 337-6647, 354-2236 or 234-2975.** P. J. Farmer.

OCTOBER 1990

5-7—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** John (007 author) Gardner, Nelson Bond.

5-7—**ConTradiction, Box 2043, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** C. Heintz, J. Vinge, J. Merril.

5-7—**NonCon, % ESFACUS, Box 4071, PSSE, Edmonton AB T6E 4S8. (403) 347-7723.** Roger Zelazny.

5-7—**TusCon, 4559 E. Burns, Tucson AZ 95711. (602) 881-3709 or 622-2520.** No more news here yet.

5-7—**MinnCon, 3136 Park Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55407. (612) 825-8256.** Works of Lovecraft, etc.

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29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $95 to 12/31/90.

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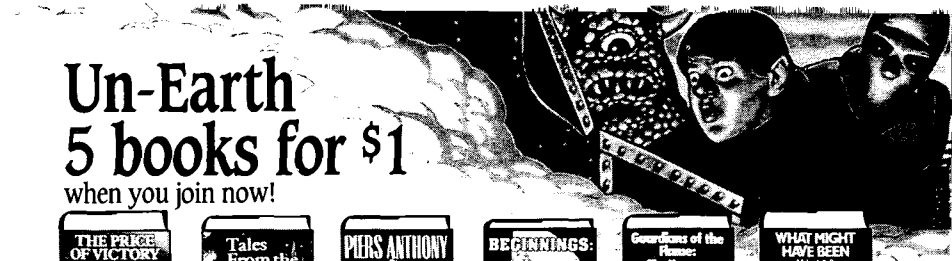

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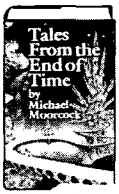

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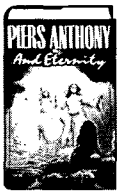

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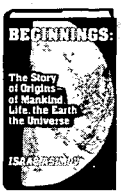

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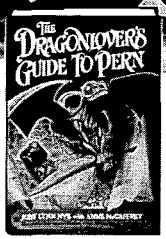

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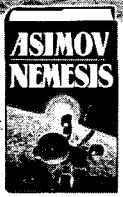

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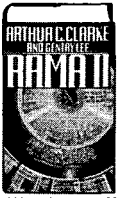

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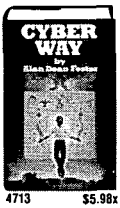

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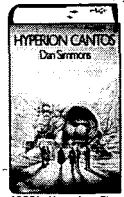

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